

**Remnants of COVID-19: An Exploration of Institutional Trust and Anti-Elitist Attitudes**

Master's Thesis

Julia Slingerland (475702)

Politics and Society

Erasmus University Rotterdam

First Supervisor: Kjell Noordzij

Second Supervisor: Tom Emery

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### **Appendix**

How did a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic shape political attitudes among the public?

This study is an exploration of how Dutch individuals with supposedly high levels of institutional trust perceive the political system and its institutions after the COVID-19 pandemic. It builds upon already existing literature about institutional trust, the link between crises and lower levels of trust, and the development anti-elitist attitudes. Qualitative data has been generated in focus group settings with eight individuals. Based on the semi-structured interviews, this study establishes how the pandemic and people's personal experiences may intensify negative attitudes about political institutions and contribute to the confirmation of political dissatisfaction and diminished trust. Thus, contributing to an understanding of cynical political views and semi-anti-elitist attitudes among the politically supportive individuals.

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## 1. Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 caused the world to be hit by a situation that would bring about a multitude of changes. Not just health-related ones, but also changes on larger societal scope. It was a great blow for many societies already affected by years of increasing tensions. Similarly, to what occurred in other Western democracies, the uncertainty of the situation in The Netherlands was reflected in people's trust towards the government and other institutions. Despite the fact that the Dutch public has been displaying high level of political trust – especially compared to citizens of neighbouring countries – the COVID pandemic seemed to create fluctuations starting with impressive increases and followed by drastic declines as the crisis progressed (see Oude Groeniger et al., 2020, Dekker et al., 2020; Krouwel et al., 2021).

But with COVID now seemingly on its way out, people have started to look at the future and world leaders and politicians are spreading hopeful messages about rediscovering compassion, solidarity, and unity. However, the question is whether this is actually the case. Was the pandemic just some unfortunate bump in the road, as has been suggested by politicians, or has something changed in a more permanent sense? Earlier studies into political instabilities already suggested these have been shaped by the rise of populist and anti-elitist sentiments fuelled by events such as the Great Recession of 2008, the immigrant crisis of 2015 and the election of populist actors in various countries (Pappas & Kriesi, 2015; Turchin, 2016) So, in the midst of a new crisis, one that has in many ways been more impactful than the financial crisis, what is to be expected of its implications for people's trust in political institutions? Could the side effects of the pandemic have left people with changed attitudes towards government establishments?

Considering the far-reaching impact of the COVID crisis, it would seem sensible for people to evaluate the political system and its establishments differently. Whether or not this has actually occurred, and if the COVID measures have indeed shaped people's attitudes

towards institutions is what this study aims to explore. In order to do so, it is important to consider how exactly the attitudes of the public may have changed. This research intends to add to the literature of political trust by exploring people's socio-political attitudes in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Doing so will allow for furthering our understanding of trust in and attitudes towards politics, as well as the extent to which these may be shaped by extraordinary situations such as a global crisis. Furthermore, the specific focus on anti-elitist and anti-establishment sentiments is meant to explore the occurrence of such socio-political attitudes outside of 'regular' populist politics. Thus, as I would argue, providing additional insight into the prevalence and nature of anti-elitist attitudes among the population.

The need for more exploration of political trust and anti-elitist sentiments through the lens of a crisis is not merely scientific. Anti-elitism not only affects the relationship between the public and the political, there is also evidence suggesting that a rise in anti-elitist sentiments comes with broader social distrust, lower social cohesion and increased tensions between groups of people (de Lange & Mügge, 2015). This, combined with the fact that the COVID pandemic created such an abnormal situation for many individuals means it is highly relevant to study how people perceive the current situation.

To explore the possible reshaping of political attitudes in light of the pandemic, it will be important to focus on the experiences of those who were most likely to display high levels of trust before the pandemic. Generally speaking, high levels of institutional trust can be found among incumbent party voters, which is why this study will focus on the experiences and attitudes of these individuals (Den Ridder et al., 2021; Krouwel et al., 2021). Additionally, this research will follow a particular focus on the potential development of anti-elitist sentiments, one of the core elements of populism, but also an important indicator of the rejection of government establishments (Mudde, 2004; Merkley, 2020). Thus, contributing to our understanding of the public's political perceptions after a large-scale crisis, as there is still a

lack of understanding about how crisis situations and government actions – through new policy implementations – may shape citizens' perceptions and interpretations of political actors and institutions. To provide a clear guideline to this research, the following research question has been established: *'How did the COVID-19 pandemic shape citizens' perceptions of the political system and political institutions, specifically with regard to the potential development of anti-elitist attitudes?'*

In order to answer this question, this paper will take the following structure: first comes an exploration of the relevant literature as presented in a theoretical framework. This framework is then succeeded by a description of the research strategy applied during this study, which includes information about context of the research, the sampling strategy, the participants, data collection and the data analysis. Next will be an overview of the findings, including an initial interpretation of the results. And finally comes the discussion section which shall further elaborated upon the relevant findings and include a final conclusion.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

### **2.1. COVID**

The outbreak of COVID-19 has been the cause of a major global crisis. Apart from the health catastrophe directly resulting from the virus; COVID and subsequent measures led to various economic, social, and political issues. Due to the uncertainty of this unfamiliar situation, governments around the world struggled to effectively respond to the crisis unfolding. In order to minimise the health emergency at hand, governments around the globe implemented new rules and restrictions. Measures ranged from social distancing and mask mandates to curfews and complete lockdowns. Governments often used emergency powers to implement such regulations, as these introduced serious limitations to civil liberties to an extent that had not been seen since WWII. In all of this, trust played a key role, as early evidence appeared to

confirm that high levels of institutional trust were linked to increased compliance with the COVID regulations (Caplanova et al., 2021).

## **2.2. Institutional trust**

Institutional trust refers to how an individual may evaluate a political institution (e.g., political parties, government, parliament) (Van der Meer and Hakhverdian, 2017; Thomassen et al., 2017). It is an indication of how individuals perceive these institutions and of their confidence in the institutions' abilities to fulfil the expectations of the public (Craig et al., 1990). The fact that institutional trust is a significant aspect of the relationship between the public, the government and society, means it is often seen as being a prerequisite of a stable democracy (Almond & Verba, 1963). Because a substantial lack of trust in political institutions could have a negative effect on citizen's perceptions, causing them to question the legitimacy of these institutions (Easton, 1965; Thomassen et al., 2017).

This perceived legitimacy is crucial as it determines the extent to which people are willing to adhere to societal rules enforced by the relevant institutions (Norris, 2011). For the COVID-19 pandemic, this meant people would either follow or ignore the rules and restrictions implemented by governments based on the degree of political trust. So, the chances of successfully restricting the effect of the virus depended on people's trust in political institutions, but what exactly did the pandemic do to institutional trust itself?

Compared to the populations of many other countries, the Dutch display relatively high levels of political trust (Dekker & Den Ridder, 2020). During the early stages of the pandemic, trust seemed to further increase, which, according to some, pointed towards a so-called 'rally-around-the-flag' effect; a phenomenon occurring when trust in government increases as a result of a crisis, often irrespective of the effectiveness of government policies (Kritzinger et al., 2021; Schraff, 2020). While the idea of such an effect occurring is supported by various researchers, others have argued a different cause must be at play. In a 2020 survey study, Oude Groeniger

et al. concluded that the increase in institutional trust among Dutch citizens had little to do with this rally-around-the-flag effect based on an emotional response to a crisis. On the contrary, institutional trust among the Dutch public declined during the earliest phase of the crisis, only to improve once restrictions had been implemented to limit the spread of the virus. Results from the year after showed yet another sharp decline in government trust, despite the fact that the pandemic was still raging on (Krouwel et al., 2021). According to Den Ridder et al. (2020), this decline in trust would have been the result of increased uncertainty about and criticism towards government policy. Thus, suggesting that appreciation of the authorities is not simply based on the presence of a crisis, but rather people's subjective perceptions of urgency and necessity.

So, what could explain such a seemingly instant change in attitudes towards the operationalisation of institutions? One could argue that the problem of political crises can be approached the same way as a political scandal. Like a crisis, a political scandal could threaten the "political formula" of a society, which, according to Nathan Yanai (1990), is "the particular choice of leaders and political parties in power and their interaction with other political groups and social elites and the treatment of existing rules and institutions" (Yanai, 1990, p. 180). Once the crisis occurs, the course of politics is completely changed as the institutions attempt to deal with the emergency. And as a result of the disrupted balance, uncertainties about the legitimacy of the political system may cause people to challenge the establishments within that system. This is especially the case if the scandal is deemed to be 'endemic', or a symptom of an already failing political system, which often causes long-lasting damage to political trust (Van der Meer, 2017).

Considering the far-reaching impact of the COVID crisis, it would seem sensible for people to evaluate the political system and its establishments differently. When people no longer regard political institutions as a representation of their expectations, the established system itself may be regarded as being out of balance (Canovan, 1999). Thus, the system no



longer fits the people's narrative of democracy. As a result, a lack of trust in institutions may eventually become an outright rejection of these institutions, which is an important aspect of anti-establishment or anti-elitist sentiments.

### **2.3. Anti-elitism**

It should be noted that few research has been conducted into anti-elitist sentiments as a topic in and of itself. Rather, scholars have explored anti-elitism as an aspect of a much broader concept, as seen in populism literature (see Akkerman et al., 2014; Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert, 2020; Citrin & Stocker, 2018; Rooduijn, 2018). And while the exploration of anti-elitism as a concept of its own – and not just as an element of populism – has been receiving increased attention in the past years (Droste, 2021; Todosijević et al., 2021), more extensive research into the topic is needed.

But to return to the subject of trust, it is more or less a fact that anti-elitism shares a close connection with political trust, or, more accurately, a lack thereof. Essential to anti-elitism is the supposed distinction between 'the elite' and 'the people.' Two different, antagonistic groups, entwined in a conflict over power (Mudde, 2004). Through the anti-elitist perspective, individuals identifying themselves with the common people perceive the – often political – elite as arrogant corrupt, immoral, and self-centred, and accuse them of having abandoned their obligation to represent the will of the people (Kazin, 1995; Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2004). This belief that the political elite are willing and able to actively work against the interests of the people, shows that anti-elitist attitudes can be regarded as a direct result of increased political distrust.

What this also indicates is that anti-elitism is heavily based on grouping individuals and some type of collective identity. A belief that one's group is disadvantaged relative to others can only occur when people are seen as members of entirely different groups, those belonging to the in-group and the out-group (Hameleers & de Vreese, 2018; Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016).

Such distinctions do not even have to be bound by some objective qualifications, the subjective perceptions of group members determine who belongs and who does not; people are seen as being virtuous, provided that they adhere to what is considered the norm. The same perceptions are responsible for creating feelings of injustice and resentment towards the out-group. (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016). This is why ‘the elite’ are met with such hostility through the anti-elitist perspective; they simply do not belong to the realm of what is considered “right” and “normal,” and their “abnormality” becomes inherently linked to corruption and dishonesty. The political elite in particular can be viewed with much aversion because of their supposed role in society, which is to represent and serve the interest of the people of the greater in-group.

Of course, feelings of trust towards political institutions vary from time to time, as it is known that trust in the political system, its institutions and its actors can be affected by outside situations. But under certain circumstances, crises for example, political trust tends to go through extreme fluctuations. For example, empirical data gathered in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008 displayed how the economic and social disruptions of the crisis could lead to dramatic declines in citizens’ trust in and support of political institutions (Turchin, 2016; Pappas & Kriesi, 2015;) Such moments of crisis then offer further opportunities for anti-elitist ideas to take hold by exaggerating the political differences and creating new divisions between the elite and the people. Again, slight changes in political trust are nothing out of the ordinary, but rapid declines in political trust as seen during the Great Recession played a significant part in shaping modern-day populism and, thus, an anti-elitist perspective (Algan et al., 2017).

So, what might be the cause of such intense anti-elitist sentiments? The literature identifies three possible explanations (Obradović et al., 2020). The first one is based on the classic idea that anti-elitist sentiments are a result of a social psychological division between “good people” and “bad elites. The second explanation argues that collective emotions, such as feelings of anger, fear, or resentment, are mobilised through political communication. And

finally, according to the third explanation, anti-elitist sentiments may be the result of a social psychological response to socioeconomic changes. This last explanation is the most relevant one for exploring a possible development of anti-elitist sentiments where they may not have existed in the first place. Because a crisis like the pandemic is a situation that causes both actual social and economic changes, as well as perceived changes in one's social position (Petersen et al., 2021)

When COVID hit, a share of the population expressed their dissatisfaction with the new measures, deeming these to be an infringement of personal freedoms and human rights, while others went as far as to outright reject government regulations (Bakker et al., 2021). Sentiments were charged with an anti-elitist component, accusing the elite and their establishments of seeking to manipulate and dominate the public with restrictions and policies. And the fact that levels of trust in the political system and its institutions appeared much higher before the pandemic, provides reason to suspect that these adverse feelings are a response to recent changes. When people experience a perceived lowering of security for their social positions as a result of social or economic changes, a need to regain control may explain anti-elitist sentiments (Obradović et al., 2020; Petersen et al., 2021).

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Research Design**

As has been mentioned, the aim of this research is to explore the political attitudes of citizens, their perceptions of trust and the potential development of anti-elitist sentiments in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the government implemented measures. Therefore, the target group for this study consisted of Dutch individuals who, under normal circumstances, are expected to display higher levels of trust in government institutions. The most reliable identifying factor is political affiliation. Among Dutch voters, those supporting the governing parties are most likely to display high levels of institutional trust (Den Ridder et al., 2021;

Krouwel et al., 2021), which includes supporters of the VVD<sup>1</sup>, D66<sup>2</sup>, CDA<sup>3</sup> and ChristenUnie<sup>4</sup>. Two additional parties, although not part of the coalition, whose voters display higher levels of trust are PvdA<sup>5</sup> and GroenLinks<sup>6</sup>.

Participants were asked about their socio-political opinions and attitudes through qualitative interviews. The addition of conducting such interviews in a focus group setting allowed the researcher to observe how participants discussed the issue as members of their respective group (Bryman, 2012). Participants were able to share their political views, which in turn helped to create more understanding about the relationships between citizens and politics (Celis et al., 2021; Van Ingelgom, 2020).

The argument behind focus groups as a research method is that opinions and attitudes held by people do not originate in a vacuum, but within certain social contexts (Boeije, 2010). Meaning that it is impossible to fully capture people's attitudes in a back-and-forth scenario with direct questions and immediate responses (Kitzinger, 1995). The use of focus groups addresses this issue by providing a social setting that allows for a better representation of reality (Boeije, 2010).

Furthermore, the use of qualitative interviews in a focus group setting aids in conducting a more in-depth analysis of the content. As participants are encouraged to engage with each other, a range of different attitudes and beliefs can emerge from the conversation. Its use provides "a rich and detailed set of data about perceptions, thoughts, feelings and impressions of people in their own words" (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990, p.140).

### **3.2. Participants and Sampling Strategy**

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<sup>1</sup> VVD or Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (Eng: People's Party for Freedom and Democracy) is a centre-right, liberal conservative party and the leading party of the Dutch government.

<sup>2</sup> D66 (Democrats 66) is a centrist social liberal party.

<sup>3</sup> CDA or Christen-Democratisch Appèl (Eng: Christian Democratic Appeal) is a centrist Christian-democratic party.

<sup>4</sup> ChristenUnie (Eng: Christian Union) is a centrist Christian-democratic party

<sup>5</sup> PvdA or Partij van de Arbeid (Eng: Labour Party) is a centre-left social-democratic party

<sup>6</sup> GroenLinks (literal translation: GreenLeft) is a centre-left/left-wing social-democratic ecopolitical party

Participants were selected by use of pre-existing groups (e.g., friends, co-workers). This strategy was derived from Kitzinger's (1995) approach, which used groups made up of individuals who already knew each other. Its purpose was to create a more "natural" and comfortable setting for the discussions, which was especially important considering the relative sensitivity of the topics addressed during the interviews. Making the groups as homogenous as possible was, thus, done to ensure a free flowing, open and sincere discussion (Morgan, 1998).

Participants were recruited with the help of the researcher's (in)formal network by contacting people directly and asking them if they might be willing to take part in a discussion about the current political climate. Eventually, eight individuals were willing to participate in the study, which resulted in a total of three focus groups. The groups were kept small, as based on a suggestion by Morgan (1998), who recommends the use of smaller groups for more complex or controversial topics, or when discussions are heavily based on the personal insights of the participants. Apart from that, the use of smaller groups has an added side of practicality, since it may be easier to manage, process and analyse a discussion involving fewer people. A table containing details about the participants can be found in the appendix (See Appendix A).

For the discussions, I intended to take on a low to moderate moderator style; meaning that I would provide the group with guiding questions related to the relevant topics without disturbing the natural progression of the discussion. Such an approach was taken to create some sort of structure to the discussion, which also ensured comparability between the different interviews (Bryman, 2012), while still maintaining the flow of a regular conversation. To explore how the pandemic may have shaped participants' political attitudes, participants were asked questions relating to a number of topics, such as: their opinions of the pandemic (e.g., how did they experience the pandemic, what were the personal implications of this period); their judgement of the political aspect of the pandemic (e.g., how did they feel about the emergency measures, what was their view on the role played by (political) institutions during

the pandemic); their general attitudes about politics (e.g., how did they perceive government institutions, how did they feel about the political system); and finally, their views on the possible consequences of the pandemic (e.g., how do they feel about the future, what were their opinions about society after COVID). Much thought was put into the phrasing of the questions to prevent priming and, thus, leading the conversation too much into a specific direction, as this could endanger the integrity of the data. More details about the topic discussed during the interviews can be found in the appendix (see Appendix C)

### **3.3. Ethical considerations**

One of the main ethical considerations for this research is related to the collection and storage of sensitive data. In accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), any information concerning special categories – including political opinions – should be treated with the utmost care. All data collected prior to or during the interviews was safely stored and regularly updated to guarantee its safety. Furthermore, no sensitive material was published or otherwise made available to any third parties, and all personal information has been fully anonymised in order to protect the identities of the participants.

Another major consideration is, of course, the requirement of informed consent. Prior to each interview, all participating individuals were thoroughly informed about the nature of the study and were asked to provide written consent for their participation. They were also assured of their rights and anonymity in the study. An example of the consent form can be found in the appendix (see Appendix B).

### **3.4. Data analysis**

The interviews were fully transcribed, and the subsequent data was analysed using ATLAS.ti through the process of coding which consisted of three stages: *open coding*, *axial coding*, and *selective coding* (Boeije, 2010). During the initial stage, the contents of the interviews were carefully examined and separated into different codes. This was done to

organise the texts. The second stage consisted of selecting fragments based on their relevance and using these to create categories based on the similarities between different codes. These categories were then used to identify the main topics of the research.

#### **4. Results**

The data revealed a general, overarching theme which can be divided into four different categories displaying the sentiments of incumbent party supports towards the political system, its institutions and its actors. The main theme resurfacing throughout the data is what will be referred to as *The Traces of Anti-elitism*, with further categories of: *Incompetence*, *Inequality in treatment*, *Dishonesty* and *The feeling of not being heard*. As will become clear throughout this section, these four categories of attitudes will be discussed in light of the pandemic, but also in a broader scope of political experiences.

##### **4.1. The Traces of Anti-elitism**

To start off, there is a reason this theme is called *The Traces of Anti-elitism* instead of something such as “anti-elitist attitudes”. And this reason is that none of the overarching attitudes displayed by participants are outright anti-elitist, but surely display characteristics of what anti-elitism is thought to entail. What makes these attitudes, as they are presented by the interviewees, not quite anti-elitist is the absence of what one could call ‘malicious intent.’ This concept of malicious intent is based on the core idea of anti-elitism that ‘the elite’ are actively seeking to undermine the position of ‘the people’ (Kazin, 1995; Mudde, 2004). Thus, their intention is inherently immoral, self-serving, and malicious. But while the data provides little evidence to suggest that incumbent party voters hold any obvious anti-elitist sentiments, their political attitudes do display traces of anti-elitist characteristics.

##### **4.1.1. Incompetence**

One of the main categories identified during the interviews, and a characteristic of an anti-elitist perspective, concerns the perceived incompetence of the political system and its

institutions. This category can be further divided into two subcategories: with narratives about a *lack of vision* and a *lack of consistency*.

**A lack of vision** Participants pointed at a lack of vision throughout government plans and actions, especially in the authorities' approach to the pandemic. It is often the government as a whole that is being addressed and how 'they' did not seem to be able to anticipate the various stages of the pandemic or to prepare for these phases in a timely manner. For Sara, this inability to anticipate was perfectly displayed during the vaccine rollout and the preparation phase before that; as the Dutch vaccination programme had a slow start compared to those in other Western countries. And with government officials making statements such as 'Dansen met Janssen'<sup>7</sup>, people initially felt reassured about the government's confidence in their strategy; only to be disappointed later on when the effectiveness of the vaccine was not as they had anticipated.

*"It was a big deal for me. I got vaccinated because I wanted to help other people and I thought it was a way out. But then they came with 'you'll need 1, 2, 3, .. 7 boosters' and I just thought to myself 'weren't you supposed to expect something like this?'. They could have prepared for this, why didn't they learn anything?"* (Nikki)

Others talked about their frustrations with the COVID measures in general. While most people were understanding of the measures, at least initially, several participants stated how their views shifted as things progressed:

*"At a certain point, I didn't really have that much understanding for what they were doing or the emergency measures. I did my duty by getting vaccinated, by keeping my distance from others. And at some point, enough is enough! They had to know that at some point you just need to be able to continue living your life!"* (Iris)

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<sup>7</sup> Literally: 'Dancing with Johnson', referring to the Johnson & Johnson vaccine. The phrase was introduced in late June, 2021 by then Minister of Health Hugo de Jonge to encourage people to get the vaccine. It was later criticised for being misleading.



*“[The lockdown] just felt so chaotic and not really thought out. Other countries had similar issues, but still, if you look at Germany, for example, they seemed to have a pretty solid plan with proper rates and such. (...) In the Netherlands it was just a little more, you know: ‘sorry guys, that was a mistake, let’s try something else’.” (Sara)*

But despite people’s annoyance about the lack of proper preparations, there is still a level of understanding for the government’s approach. This is an interesting contradiction. On one hand, the government is judged for its lack of vision, but at the same time it is the best they could have done.

*“It was a completely new situation for everyone, try doing it yourself! I think there will always be comments. Not everyone could have done this.” (Yvonne)*

*“In hindsight things could always have been better, but in my opinion, it was very impressive how the government was also able to acknowledge that. I doubt they were actually taking a gamble and they must have consulted many experts. I think that’s very commendable.” (Willem)*

**A lack of consistency** However, the absence of foresight is not the only aspect that made the government incompetent. Pandemic management continuously changed throughout the crisis, resulting in feelings of confusion and frustration. Participants felt uncertain about what rules to follow and reported that their tendency to follow COVID regulations changed over time. As a result, people’s own insecurities about the situation reflected negatively on the management skills of the people and institutions in charge; who, because of their ‘weird choices’ seemed unable to adapt to the situation.

*“[the government] did what they could, so they wouldn’t have been able to do any better. But I do think things should have been done differently, there would be a mask mandate, and next thing it was gone. Or it was this or that. I feel like [the government] couldn’t even agree on their own rules. Especially during the last phase, last year, they*

*didn't even stick to their own rules. So, I would think 'what am I supposed to do?'"*

(Nikki)

*"I get why they had to be tough in the beginning, because no one knew what was going on. But after a while other countries started opening up and The Netherlands didn't. And the government couldn't really explain why. All of it just felt so random, it didn't make any sense." (Laura)*

That being said, displays of government incompetence are not limited to the authorities' handling of the pandemic, on top of that, incompetence reaches beyond the boundaries of single institutions as interviewees regard the entire political system as 'flawed.' The system is designed in a manner that makes it difficult to respond to pressing issues such as the housing crisis, the climate crisis, immigration issues, student loan problems, inflation, and, more recently, the political scandal over childcare benefits. As Iris states:

*"It just makes me so angry, because, you know, it's always the same, it's embedded into our [political] culture. These things, like the benefits scandal, take so, so much time. And I get that it takes time, but then you read about how millionaires and billionaires paid too many taxes and got their refund within a few weeks. While at the same time there are people, parents whose kids were taken by the state, who are still waiting on acknowledgement and their money."*

In its current form the system simply cannot be governed because every measure or suggestion introduced by one party can be blocked indefinitely by another party. The system is, thus, deemed to be ineffective, its procedures take up too much time without there ever being a guarantee of a positive outcome. This lack of vision and consistency within the system itself is the reason for all sorts of problems. Problems that have become even more apparent during the pandemic.

*“Changes have to be made. Our country cannot continue like it did before and during the crisis, with only short-term solutions. We need long-term investments for healthcare and education.”* (Thomas)

#### **4.1.2. The unequal treatment of different groups**

Not only do the political system and its institutions lack in competence, but interviewees also believe they and others are not being treated equally to certain groups. Such feelings about a difference in treatment can result in a perceived us-them distinction, where the ‘them’ group enjoys a favoured position. The rich in particular are thought to enjoy certain privileges enforced by the political system, since decisions made through the system are in favour of the more affluent groups in society. For some, these differences in treatment have become blatantly obvious during the pandemic. The COVID-related measures affected many different industries and in order to relieve some of the economic blows, temporary measures were taken to provide reimbursements for all types of businesses and organisations in the affected sectors. The problem with this appears to be the way funds were dispersed and who received what.

*“Who gets to decide over all that money and who gets support and who doesn’t? Why did Schiphol receive all that money, while self-employed businesses had to jump through all those hoops to get the smallest amounts? I mean, it’s a great concept, but I’m not sure if it really helped the people who needed it. Especially because they have to pay it back!”* (Iris)

*“I understand the government tried to help people with all those extra funds, but it’s so unfair how they have to pay it back. With interest even! I mean, these people tried so hard to get through this horrible period and it wasn’t their fault! The government was supposed to protect us!”* (Nikki)

While in some cases reimbursements had to be repaid, this only applied for any support that was wrongfully granted, or if the turnover of the business exceeded initial expectations (Netherlands Enterprise Agency, 2020). However, this does not change the fact that people may still *perceive* some kind of injustice. Large companies are deemed unworthy of the support they receive, because it victimises those who truly needed it.

Still, this not the only thing criticised by some, because, unlike most of the population, the affluent groups in society are shielded from certain issues, such as those caused by immigration. Thomas points out that asylum seekers' centres are situated in more destitute locations that *'seem to carry all the burdens of the system,'* while richer neighbourhoods are overlooked in this regard. This idea of the existence of a double standard is what leaves people with a cynical view of the political system.

Then again, the rich are not the only social group thought to receive special treatment from the system; a few participants express their discontent about the way refugees are treated. These narratives concern the belief that refugees are easily welcomed into the country and receive all sorts of benefits, at the expense of the native population. The following quotes are meant to illustrate the threat these participants experience:

[When talking about one of her foster daughters] *"She'll never qualify for a house. Everything within her price range goes to refugees and the only homes left are unaffordable (...) In my opinion local authorities should first consider the local population and their children!"* (Monica)

*"There is a big shortage of housing, but you know, those refugees also need to live somewhere, so of course they are first in line. (...) And even when you're on the waiting list, there's no guarantee. You'll just be moved down the list because others come first."* (Willem)

These narratives really seem to focus on an us-versus-them way thinking and a belief that government and the political system have lost sight of the majority of the public, all in favour of a select few. Thus, contributing to feelings of victimisation of one's own group and a lower sense of social security.

#### **4.1.3. The dishonesty**

Another particularly damning accusation against the political system and its institutions is that it enables dishonesty and that individual actors will use the system to deceive the public. Dishonesty can occur in different forms. The most obvious, of course, is through the act of lying.

*“You know, what I’m seeing is how the whole thing of lying just keeps getting worse and worse. Things are being denied, things that have definitely been said. And it just bothers me. I find it extremely frustrating and that’s why my faith in politics just diminishes. (...) It’s the system. The system is what enables people to act like this; to make all sorts of promises and just deny it later on. They’re lying over there in Parliament and those are supposed to be the people representing us.” (Willem)*

People feel, understandably, angry about blatant lies, but dishonesty and the feeling of being deceived can also happen through lack of communication between the public and political institutions. Without proper communication, citizens cannot be fully involved in the democratic process. According to the interviewees, this is not to say that every little detail about every plan should be publicly discussed:

*“I completely understand not sharing everything. But how are we supposed to trust the process if we have no idea what’s going on? I would like to know how my money gets invested. We saw it during COVID, everything is so much harder without communication.” (Nikki)*

#### **4.1.4. The feeling of not being heard**

A final source of frustration and distrust, as can be derived from the interviews, is the feeling that representatives do not truly listen to the public. Given that one of the key elements of a well-functioning democracy is the simple condition that people are heard, it is no surprise a system that ignores its citizens will be questioned. This is also why some may sympathise with the idea of the COVID protests, regardless of their personal opinions. People have been noticing the frustrations from others in society and while they may not agree with this particular approach, many do seem to believe that something must be done for the government to listen to the public.

*“We’ve all seen those protests against the vaccine and the lockdown. And no, I don’t agree with them, but these people also need to be heard. It’s important to listen to their side of the story, to find out where their anger came from. But right now, the government just keeps ignoring them and it’s a big group. (...) Some of them may be a little weird or just insane, but there’s also a large group of regular people who are just frustrated with the situation. Which I completely understand.”* (Iris)

*“You can’t make people think a certain way and you can’t force them to do something against their will, even if it’s in the best interest of society. Those people who seemed reluctant in the first place have become even more extreme. All because the government isn’t willing to listen. It just makes the problem so much worse!”*  
(Laura)

*“I think we need to involve more regular people into the discussion. Just let them contribute to Parliament, not to govern or anything, but simply to make sure the people are actually being heard.”* (Yvonne)

As can be derived from these statements, refraining from participating within this political system is not an option. Despite its flaws, voting is quite literally seen as the only way a person could make a difference. And every person should be urged to contribute.

*“I will continue to use my right to vote, even if I’m losing faith in its power. Because if I were to choose to refrain from voting, I would lose any right to speak my mind.”*

(Willem)

*“I’m one of the few in my group of friends that actually bothers to vote. We are the ones that could actually make a change and they’re just sitting there like: ‘what’s point if me voting isn’t going to make a difference’. Well, you’ve seen what happens! You get another guy like Rutte, maybe things would have been different if you actually took the time to vote!”* (Nikki)

## 5. Discussion

As has been stated on multiple occasions, the aim of this research is to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic could have shaped the political attitudes in Dutch citizens with higher than average levels of institutional trust; and to examine the potential development of anti-elitist sentiments. Using the aforementioned results, this section will be a thorough discussion of the implications and limitations of the study.

Before turning to the main objective of this research, I first want to address the second half of the research question, which focuses on the potential development of anti-elitist attitudes. This is to determine whether the data provides any evidence to offer insight in the manner in which such attitudes could have been shaped through or by the pandemic.

The reason why this study emphasised anti-elitist attitudes to begin with, lies in the fact that previous quantitative studies pointed towards a drastic decline in institutional trust and political satisfaction during the COVID pandemic (Den Ridder et al., 2021; Krouwel et al., 2021). Such declines were seen among voters across the political spectrum, indicating that the phenomenon went beyond any differences in political ideology. Be that as it may, the quantitative data does not explore the exact reason behind this phenomenon, nor does it describe what exactly has changed in people’s attitudes regarding political institutions.

This research, however, does offer an explanation. While this study found no evidence to suggest that of incumbent party voters held any obvious anti-elitist sentiments, their political attitudes do displays traces of anti-elitist characteristics. It shows that people who were expected to display high levels of trust actually hold various negative attitudes towards the political system, its institutions and its actors. The system is not seen as a well-functioning one benefitting all citizens, but as a severely lacking and broken system that offers little to the public which it's supposed to benefit.

This perspective may seem incredibly similar to the anti-elitist point of view; with a political system that does not serves the common good, either because its institutions and actors are too incompetent to do so, or because it ignores the people its to represent. There is, however, a key difference, being the absence of some kind of 'malicious intent.' Anti-elitism follows the belief that the elite and elite serving establishments actively seek their own fortune, at the cost of the people's well-being (Mudde, 2004, Merkley, 2020). The failing of the political system is thus due to malice on behalf of the political elite, causing people to then reject the political institutions serving these elite. But this belief in the malevolence of authorities has not been found in supporters of incumbent parties. Political actors and institutions are viewed negatively, due to their perceived incompetence and dishonesty, and because people may feel unheard or experience differences in how groups in society are treated. But these individuals also expressed a belief in the right intentions. So, even though the people who are most likely to be represented by the political system display a low sense of trust in the system, and despite their negative views of the system's ability to represent and serve the public; the underlying cause, so to say, lies with an institutional inability to use the system, rather than a desire to actively seek the public's misfortune.

Having addressed the second part of this study's research question, I want to focus on the main objective of this research, which is to answer the question *how did the COVID-19*



*pandemic shape citizens, perceptions, politics, and political institutions?* As mentioned before, earlier studies pointed towards a shift in institutional trust during the pandemic. Thus, it would be logical to assume that the pandemic itself was a major contributing factor in this change, causing people to change their attitudes towards political institutions. This assumption, however, does not meet the findings of this study and I would argue that COVID did not directly lead to more negative attitudes, but instead played a part in increasing their weight. Despite the limited sample size of this study, which inhibits our ability to make a true generalisation, I would argue that people's dissatisfaction with the political system and its institutions took on different forms as a result of the pandemic experience. Which aligns with the idea that people's experiences in times of change and uncertainty about one's position in society may generate distrust in the government (Obradović et al., 2020; Petersen et al., 2021). That being said, the pandemic was not the leading cause for these attitudes to exist in the first place. Because the conversations show that people have also been dissatisfied with the government's role in and approach to other issues, such as the housing shortage, the climate crisis, inflation, and the rather recent scandal around childcare benefits. Going back to the initial discussion of political scandals, as mentioned in the theoretical framework, one might argue that the combination of recent events acts as such an 'endemic' scandal, which could also partially explain the change in attitudes towards the political system (Van der Meer, 2017). Although such conclusions cannot be made based on this research and would require further investigation.

Nevertheless, similar results can be found in a 2020 publication by Peeters et al., which also concluded that a diminishing of institutional trust corresponds with personal experiences and that certain attitudes gain prominence because these are confirmed by said experiences. That being said, Peeters et al.'s (2020) study did not account for any individuals who were expected to display high levels trust, like incumbent party voters. Similarly, to most other studies with a comparable focus, this research only explored feelings of distrust and political

attitudes in individuals who displayed limited institutional trust to begin with. Even so, the similarities between this research and the 2020 publication confirm that personal experiences may intensify negative attitudes about political institutions and contribute to the confirmation of political dissatisfaction and diminished trust.

The question that remains is, what does this imply for the relationship between the public and the political system? While more extensive research is required in order to form any major conclusions, these findings do add to the concern about the stability of the political system. Even before the COVID pandemic, our society was already experiencing the strains caused by other developments in recent years (Turchin, 2016; Pappas & Kriesi, 2015). But with these results also pointing at the intensity of cynical political views and semi-anti-elitist attitudes among the more politically supportive individuals suggests that the distance between the public and the political system may only increase.

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## Appendix

### Appendix A: Overview of participants

	Name	Age	Gender	Highest completed level of education
1	Nikki	23	F	Lower Vocational
2	Sara	25	F	University (master's degree)
3	Thomas	29	M	University (master's degree)
4	Willem	71	M	Higher vocational
5	Yvonne	70	F	High school
6	Monica	47	F	Lower Vocational
7	Iris	22	F	University (bachelor's degree)
8	Laura	22	F	University (master's degree)

### Appendix B: Informed consent form

Mijn naam is Julia Slingerland en ik ben een student aan de Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam (EUR). Als onderdeel van mijn masterscriptie doe ik onderzoek naar politieke opvattingen na de periode van corona maatregelen. Ik zal u informeren over het onderzoek en u uitnodigen om hieraan deel te nemen. Dit toestemmingsformulier kan woorden bevatten die u niet begrijpt. U kunt mij om uitleg vragen wanneer iets onduidelijk is.

De coronatijd en de daaraan gerelateerde maatregelen hebben veel impact gehad op onze maatschappij. Ik wil erachter komen wat de maatregelen hebben betekend voor de politieke opvattingen van de Nederlandse bevolking.

Het onderzoek zal in de maanden april tot en met juni plaatsvinden. U wordt uitgenodigd om in deze periode éénmalig deel te nemen aan een groepsdiscussie die ongeveer anderhalf uur zal duren.

U wordt uitgenodigd om aan dit onderzoek deel te nemen omdat ik van mening ben dat uw persoonlijke ervaringen en opvattingen kunnen bijdragen aan het begrip van en kennis over de relatie tussen de Nederlandse bevolking en de politiek.

Deelname aan dit onderzoek is vrijwillig, de keuze om mee te doen is helemaal aan u. Mocht u op een later moment van gedachten veranderen, kunt u nog altijd uw deelname stopzetten, ook als u eerder toestemming heeft gegeven.

U mag uw toestemming voor het gebruik van de gegevens die u heeft verstrekt intrekken met uitzondering van toestemming voor gegevens die zijn geanonimiseerd. Als u besluit niet meer mee te doen aan dit onderzoek, hoeft u dit niet uit te leggen en heeft dit voor u verder geen gevolgen.

Graag zou ik u willen uitnodigen om aan dit onderzoeksproject deel te nemen. Indien u besluit om mee te doen, zal u worden gevraagd om deel te nemen aan een discussie met 3-5 andere personen met vergelijkbare ervaringen. Deze discussie zal worden geleid door mijzelf. U hoeft geen informatie te delen waarbij u zich ongemakkelijk voelt, ook hierin is de keuze aan u. De discussie zal plaatsvinden op een voor alle deelnemers toegankelijke locatie, deze is nader te bepalen. Verder wordt van de hele discussie een geluidsopname gemaakt, deze is uitsluitend bedoeld om het gesprek te kunnen verwerken en zal niet worden gepubliceerd. Daarbij zal niemand in de opname bij diens naam worden aangeduid.

Tijdens dit onderzoek wordt (mogelijk) van u gevraagd om persoonsgegevens te verstrekken. Hierbij gaat het om voor dit onderzoek relevante gegevens over uw politieke opvattingen, en mogelijke religieuze en ideologische overtuigingen.

Van alle groepsdeelnemers wordt gevraagd op niet met andere mensen buiten de groep te praten over wat binnen de groep is besproken. De vraag is om alle informatie vertrouwelijk te houden. Desondanks is het niet mogelijk om te garanderen dat andere groepsdeelnemers de informatie vertrouwelijk houden.

Uw persoonsgegevens (zoals geluids- of beeldopnamen, formulieren en andere documenten die in het kader van dit onderzoek worden gecreëerd of verzameld) zullen gedurende het onderzoek op een veilige locatie worden opgeslagen.

U mag vragen om uw persoonsgegevens in te zien, te wijzigen als ze niet kloppen of deze te verwijderen. Als u zich wilt beroepen op uw rechten of als u een vraag heeft over privacy in verband met dit onderzoek, kunt u via [fg@eur.nl](mailto:fg@eur.nl) contact opnemen met de functionaris voor gegevensbescherming (FG) van de Erasmus Universiteit. Als u een klacht wilt indienen in verband met privacy, kunt u dit doen bij de nationale toezichthoudende instantie inzake persoonsgegevens in Nederland (Autoriteit Persoonsgegevens).

Indien u vragen heeft, kunt u deze nu stellen of er later op terugkomen. Mocht u op een later moment vragen hebben, kunt u contact met mij opnemen via e-mail: [475702js@eur.nl](mailto:475702js@eur.nl)

Ik heb het informatie- en toestemmingsformulier gelezen en ik begrijp wat het doel van het onderzoek is en dat er gegevens van mij zullen worden verzameld. Het onderzoek is duidelijk aan mij uitgelegd en ik kreeg de gelegenheid vragen te stellen.

Door dit formulier te ondertekenen

1. geef ik toestemming voor deelname aan dit onderzoek;
2. bevestig ik dat ik ten minste 18 jaar oud ben;



3. geef ik aan dat ik begrijp dat deelname aan dit onderzoek geheel vrijwillig is; en
4. geef ik aan dat ik begrijp dat mijn gegevens zullen worden geanonimiseerd met het oog op publicatie, voor onderwijs en verder onderzoek, tenzij ik toestemming geef voor het citeren van mijn woorden (Citaten), het vermelden van mijn werkelijke naam (Werkelijke naam) en/of het gebruik van mijn persoonsgegevens voor onderwijs en voor verder onderzoek.

### **Toestemming**

#### **Bijzondere persoonsgegevens**

Ik geef toestemming voor het verzamelen, verwerken, gebruiken en opslaan van mijn persoonsgegevens ten behoeve van de doelen van dit onderzoek, namelijk [politieke opvattingen/religieuze overtuigingen/ideologische overtuigingen/geluidsopnamen d.m.v. interviews/beeldopnamen d.m.v. interviews]

#### **Geluid/beeld**

Hierbij geef ik toestemming voor het maken van geluids- en/of beeldopnamen tijdens het onderzoek en voor het omzetten van mijn antwoorden in geschreven tekst.

**Naam van de deelnemer:**

**Handtekening van de deelnemer:**

**Datum:**

### **Appendix C: Topic list**

#### Algemene informatie

- Leeftijd
- Geslacht
- Opleidingsniveau

#### COVID pandemie (ervaringen en inzichten)

- Hoe heeft u de coronacrisis ervaren?
- Wat heeft de coronacrisis voor u persoonlijk betekend?
  - o Hoe heeft men de periode doorgemaakt → inzicht in persoonlijke ervaringen
  - o Wat heeft men in diens omgeving gezien?

#### Connectie tussen COVID en politieke belevingen

- Hoe kijkt u terug op de coronamaatregelen?
  - o Mening over de maatregelen en hoe maatregelen zijn ingezet
  - o Heeft de overhied voldoende gedaan?

- Wat is uw kijk op de rol die overheidsinstanties hebben gespeeld tijdens de coronacrisis?
  - o Kijk op verschillende instanties → RIVM, Rutte, Parlement
  - o Rol van verschillende partijen (ook waar ze zelf op hebben gestemd)
- Wat denkt u van de communicatie tussen de overheid en de bevolking → is iedereen voldoende opgenomen in het beleid?
- Hoe staat u er nu in vergeleken met twee jaar geleden?
  - o Gaat het terugveren of zal het zo blijven?
- Wat denkt u dat de pandemie heeft betekend voor de houding van mensen tegenover Nederlandse politiek?

#### Politieke opinies en deelname

- Ziet u uzelf als politiek betrokken?
  - o Waarom wel/niet
- Zou u iets willen delen over de politieke partijen die u steunt?
  - o Waarom steun voor deze partij
- Hoe kijkt u naar de overheid/overheidsinstanties?
  - o Wat doen politici goed of juist niet goed
- Hoe ziet u de Nederlandse rechtstaat/democratie?
- Heeft u vertrouwen in de instituten?
  - o Belangrijk om op distincties te letten → verschillen in vertrouwen richting verschillende actors?
- Heeft de coronacrisis/de aanpak ervan uw kijk op bestuurders veranderd?

#### Maatschappelijke gevolgen van de crisis

- Wat denkt u dat de grootste gevolgen zullen zijn?
  - o Kloof
  - o Polarisatie