

Do students consider wokeism a danger to democracy?

by Rob Franken, Jochem Tolsma 07/10/2022

(This blog post originally appeared on [StukRoodVlees](#).)

During the annual [HJ Schoo lecture](#) on 12 September, Minister of Justice and Security Dilan Yesilgöz slammed the woke movement as a threat to the democratic state. Fear not, not everyone who believes that discrimination is at least partly to blame for social injustice is denounced by the minister as wokeist. To her, wokeism is a movement of “people who believe they have the right to decide what information and opinions are correct and incorrect. What is hurtful and not hurtful. Who is good and bad. People who, under the guise of inclusion, cancel individuals and their work deemed objectionable.”

She also claimed that wokeism is infringing on academic freedoms. Based on hard to miss media coverage, wokeism is indeed on the rise in universities. Not only among administrators, who have appointed diversity officers and introduced gender quotas in an attempt to dismantle the alleged patriarchal power structures, but also among students. Woke students are in favour of decolonising the curriculum in an effort to combat racism and sexism and demand safe spaces where they can escape so-called bigots. According to an article by [Elma Drayer](#), entire disciplines run the risk of being held hostage by wokeism.

You may be wondering whether woke culture really is a cause for concern. We wondered the same thing, as did the minister. Whereas the minister responded with a simple ‘yes’, we decided to conduct a survey among more than 700 students from Radboud University and HAN University of Applied Sciences (see Box 1 for the research methods). What do students think of the woke movement?

Let’s start by admitting that we didn’t ask whether students identified as woke or whether they sought to muzzle their professors. What we wanted to know was (1) whether students are invested in the theme, (2) the extent to which they agree or disagree with the minister and (3) whether opinions regarding wokeism were polarised. That is, led to a clear divide of opinion extremes between students. We thought it best to approach these research questions from an ‘inclusive perspective’. Thus, next to the statement about wokeism, we also presented students with several other political statements about issues like the refugee crisis, the nitrogen crisis and the EU (see Box 1).

Box 1: Research methods

Data collection

We administered an online questionnaire to 718 students from Radboud University (76%) and HAN University of Applied Sciences (24%), which they completed between 19 and 28 September 2022. One of the questions we asked was where students see themselves on the political spectrum (left to right). We also asked about the extent to which political issues interest them (answers: not at all interested, somewhat interested, extremely interested) and we presented them with several statements about political themes (answers: completely agree, agree, neutral, disagree, completely disagree, unsure).

Statements

- The government must reduce income inequality in the Netherlands.
- A country is stronger if everyone has the same customs and traditions.
- European unification has gone too far.
- Climate change poses a serious threat to the world.
- Women are better suited to raising young children than men.
- There should be an annual cap on the number of asylum seekers a country admits.
- Upside-down Dutch flags in public places should be taken down.
- ***Wokeism is a threat to democracy.***
- The government should try and convince as many
- Dutch people as possible to take the Covid-19 vaccine and booster.

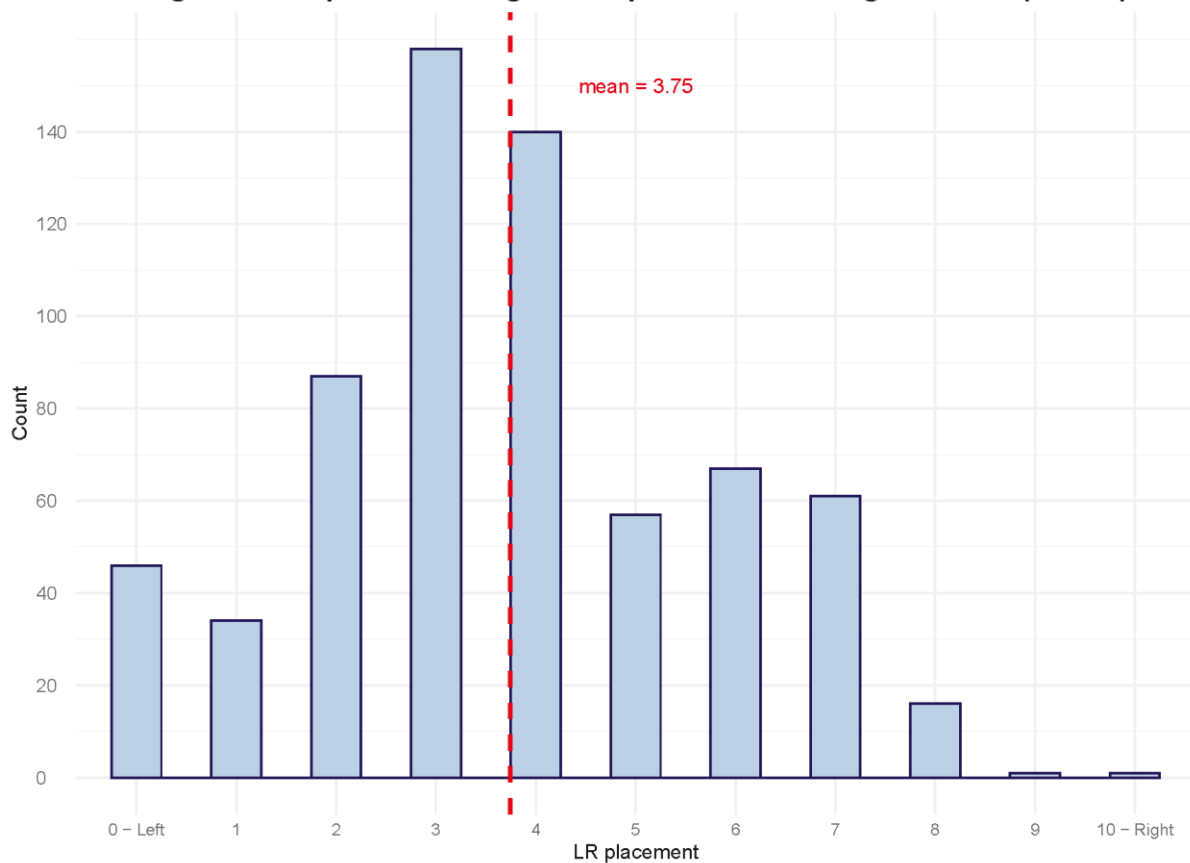
Polarisation

We define polarisation as the variation in opinion differences, d_{ij} , among all possible students pairs i and j . The mathematical formula is:

$$VAR(d_{ij}) = \frac{1}{N-1} \sum_{ij} (d_{ij} - \bar{d}_{ij})^2.$$

What were our findings? Let's start with a disclaimer. Most of the students surveyed identified as being relatively left-leaning on the political spectrum. When asked to position themselves on a left-right scale of 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right), only 22% identified as right of centre. The average score was 3.75 (see Figure 1). By comparison, the [average Dutch voter](#) scored a 5 on the same scale, according to the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study. Therefore, it's not inconceivable that the students surveyed see wokeism as less of a threat to democracy than the average Dutch person.

Figure 1. 10-points left-right self-placement among students (N=668)



Note: 50 students responded 'unsure'.

That being said, a large proportion of the students surveyed was not interested in political issues (30% reported being not interested, 54% were somewhat interested and only 16% were very interested). This makes the participating students less interested in politics than the average Dutch person (26% of the representative NKO sample is not interested in politics.) The statement about wokeism proved the hardest for students to answer, with 24% responding with 'unsure' (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Proportion of students unsure about statements (N=718)

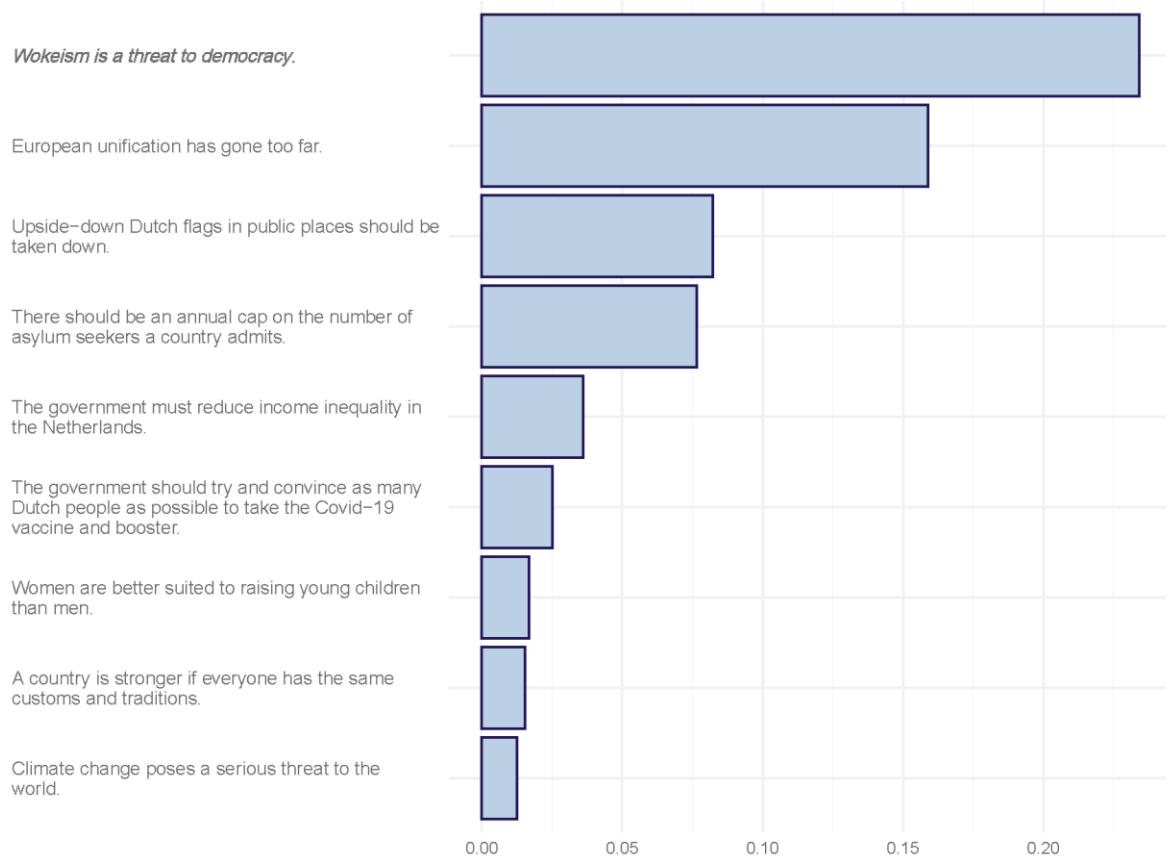
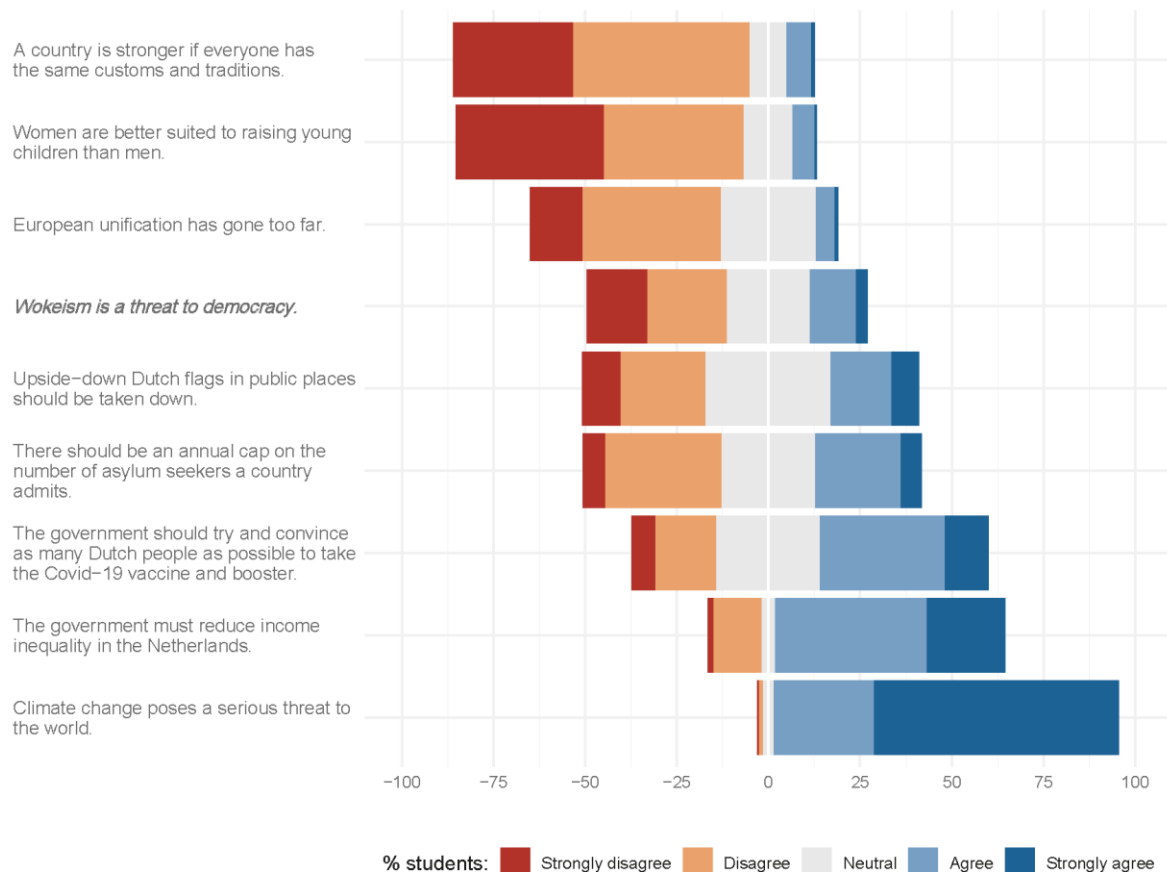


Figure 3 shows how many students agree and disagree with the minister. Surprisingly, 16% of the surveyed students agree with the minister's statements, which is surprising given the left-leaning sentiments of the respondents. In contrast, 95% of respondents consider climate change to pose a serious global threat. Opinions on wokeness and wokeism have never been properly assessed, especially not over a longer period of time. As a result, there is no hockey stick graph to suggest an uptick in wokeism. If wokeism were to grow exponentially, more students would likely share the minister's concerns. But that's not the case yet.

In fact, a significant proportion of students completely disagree with her stance. Does this mean students see wokeness as a boon for democracy? Or that lecturers should review their reading lists to make sure they include minority authors? While more research is required, the results so far suggest that the minister has a considerable group of supporters and opponents on both sides.

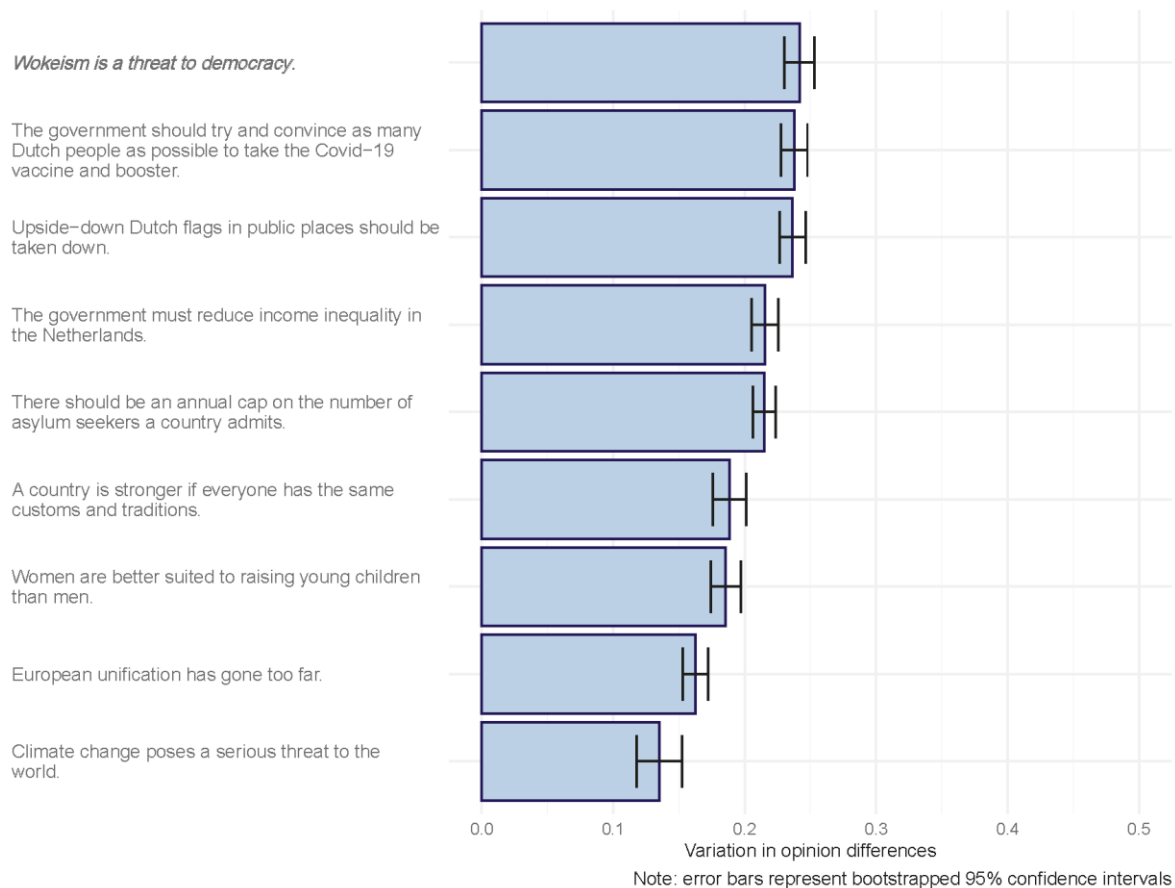
Figure 3. Percentage of students (dis)agreeing with statements



An interactive version of Figure 3 can be found [\[here\]](#).

This brings us to our final research question about polarisation. Figure 4 ranks the various statements based on degree of polarisation. The statements about wokeness, vaccination and the farmers' protests proved to be the most polarising. We can therefore assume that the general population is also divided on the issue of wokeness; at least, more so than on other political issues, such as climate change, income inequality and migration. Not only could this explain the fierceness of the debate itself, but also the hold it seems to have over the minister and the media.

Figure 4. Statements ordered by degree of polarisation



What conclusions can we draw? According to the minister, the woke movement poses a threat to democracy. The majority of the students surveyed disagree with this stance. However, the survey did bring to light some initial stirrings of polarisation among students, which could eventually pose a threat to democracy. After all, opponents these days refuse to listen to each other. Fortunately, the political polarisation of students is relatively mild, with few students adopting an extreme stance either way. This means there's still room for debate, which society as a whole and students and lecturers in particular should actively engage in.

Finally, most students seem to find politics wholly uninteresting. This could explain why many students have no opinion on political issues and themes. And therein, to us, lies the real threat to democracy.

Reference

Jacobs, K., Lubbers, M., Sipma, T., Spierings, N. and T.W.G Van der Meer (2021). *Dutch Parliamentary Election Study 2021 (DPES/NKO 2021)*. DANS. <https://doi.org/10.17026/dans-xcy-ac9q>