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Promoting intergroup solidarity with a narrative of inclusion

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Promoting intergroup solidarity with a narrative of inclusion

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Key findings

- Exposure to an inclusive working-class narrative to promote the incomes of the working classes makes people less willing to support the 'own people first' principle
- Such an inclusive narrative does however not increase interethnic solidarity
- Our study does not find an effect of being exposed to the narratives on differences in prioritization of policies, but if anything, there is a backfire effect that mentioning 'immigration' increases immigration salience and makes people to prioritize 'reducing migration'
- Studies on narratives promoting solidarity profit from inclusion of moral dimensions, the role of recognition outside the economic domain and relying on everyday language to reduce the distance between messenger and receiver

Exploring Solidarity and Opposition in Contemporary Society

A critical question in many societies is whom people choose to include in their expressions of solidarity. The rise of radical, extreme right-wing ideologies, which emphasize a stark division between "us" and "them," increasingly defines "us" as an ethnic white majority. The "them" category, though fluid, often encompasses immigrants broadly and is further specified to include Muslims, Blacks, Arabs, refugees or simply "fortune-seekers", as well as specific origin country populations such as East Europeans, Moroccans, Turks. This rhetoric frames the interests of "us" in opposition to those of "them," asserting that elites—particularly the left-wing cultural elite—prioritize their own interests and those of "them" over the majority.

A notable shift has occurred among the traditional base of left-wing politics: the working class. In the Netherlands, for the first time in 2023, more working-class voters supported radical-right parties than left-wing parties (SP and GL-PvdA) combined (Lubbers et al. 2023). Opposition to immigration and distancing from immigrants emerge as key drivers of support for these parties. Beyond resentment towards established (mainly left-wing) politics for perceived neglect, immigrants are often scapegoated as a source of societal misfortune. This phenomenon reflects both scapegoating mechanisms and perceived conflicts, whether realistic or imagined.

Radical-right rhetoric resonates with segments of society that feel they have lost their social standing (Lamont, 2023), attributing these changes to immigration. These groups are often the most exposed to societal changes caused by migration (in neighbourhoods, in schools) and are also more likely to perceive threats. But this is by far not the whole story. Many radical-right voters live in environments with few immigrants (or other outgroups as

formulated in the rhetoric of the radical right) and are affected more by the perception of potential societal change, which reinforces their inclination to protect their in-group solidarity.

Beyond Increasing Solidarity: Reducing Support for "Own-People-First" Policies

We sought to understand what narratives can encourage people to perceive commonalities that bridge divides and foster solidarity where it is initially low. To explore this, we developed three vignettes. One focused on the diversity within the working class, emphasizing the importance of inclusive solidarity in the fight for better wages. Although radical-right support and xenophobia are not limited to the working class, we hypothesized that highlighting a shared identity based on social class could foster interethnic solidarity. Stressing the shared financial struggles of a diverse working class, we anticipated increased interethnic solidarity across this group.

This hypothesis was tested in the 2023 Dutch National Election Survey. Respondents read the vignette and answered questions about class solidarity and issue prioritization. Our findings, coming forwards in a research article (Campbell-Bethancourt, Bilgili, Blommaert & Lubbers, 2025, *submitted*), revealed that narratives emphasizing an inclusive working class did not increase interethnic solidarity compared to narratives focusing on the working class without highlighting its diversity. However, an unexpected outcome emerged: individuals exposed to the inclusive narrative were less likely to support exclusive, chauvinistic solidarity—policies favoring natives over others. This suggests that while inclusive narratives may not directly enhance solidarity, they can reduce support for radical-right rhetoric prioritizing "natives first."

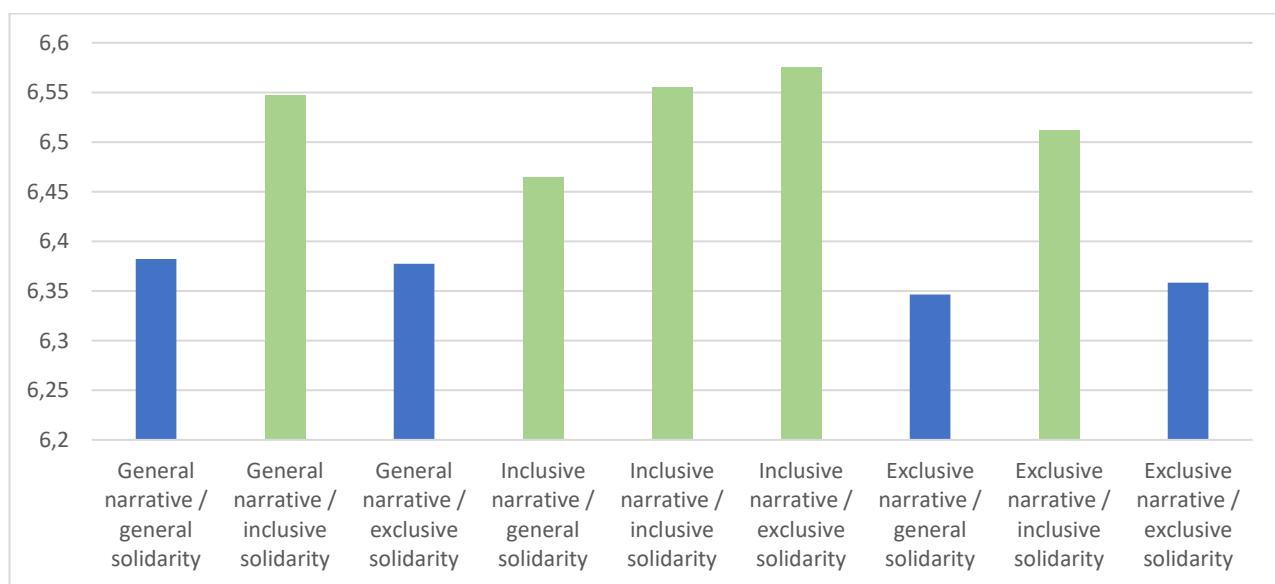
Comparing our pilot study with international research, we identified areas for improvement in the narratives' construction. For example, U.S.-based studies (e.g. Haney López, 2019) show that narratives are more effective when they include a common adversary to unite the superordinate identity. Additionally, the importance of recognition beyond shared economic struggles was not addressed in our narrative (Lamont, 2023). Moreover, terminology presents a challenge. Phrases like "people with and without a migration background" may align with policies but may not resonate strong enough culturally or politically in the Dutch context. Similarly, while our survey referenced "working class," this term is less commonly used in Dutch politics, where alternatives like "working people," "normal people," or "middle class" are more prevalent. Future studies should experiment with alternative terminologies and identity formulations.

Potential Backfiring Effects: The Salience of Migration in Narratives

We also examined how narratives influenced policy prioritization. Specifically, we explored whether an inclusive narrative increased support for poverty reduction over migration restriction and whether an exclusive, chauvinistic narrative heightened prioritization of migration control. Two approaches were used: comparing responses to prioritization questions immediately after exposure to the narratives and analyzing changes within individuals who answered the questions before and after exposure.

Our findings showed no significant relationship between the narratives and prioritization of migration control or poverty reduction. However, a potential backfiring effect emerged: references to diversity within the working class appeared to slightly increase the prioritization of reducing immigration (the green bars in Figure 1).

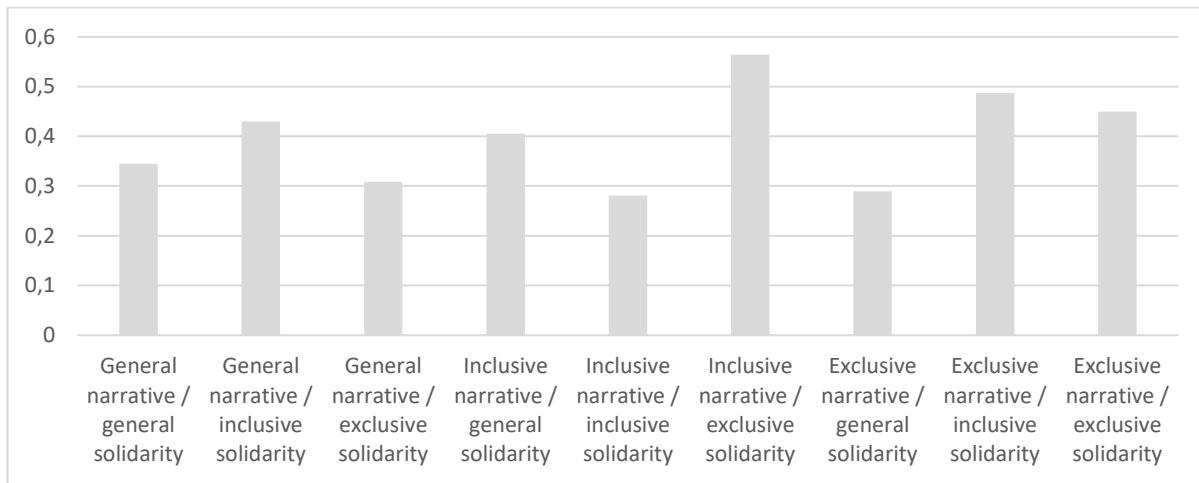
Figure 1. Prioritization of 'reducing migration' as a function of exposure to the narratives



The within individual change in prioritization of fighting poverty (comparing respondents' score to issue prioritization before the elections and after the elections as a function of the narratives) was significantly affected by exposure to the combination of the narrative and follow-up questions on solidarity, but it is hard to give a meaningful interpretation to the pattern. We therefore conclude that in the domain of prioritization of fighting poverty, the narrative on inclusive working class has no clear-cut contribution.

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Figure 2. Within individual difference between measurement before and after elections in prioritization of fighting poverty as a function of exposure to narrative and question formulations on solidarity



Exposure to the 'inclusive narrative' did not decrease within-individual prioritization of reducing the number of immigrants. Instead, it was the exclusive, chauvinistic welfare state narrative that on average showed more of a decrease in prioritization of the migration issue (the yellow bars in Figure 3). It seems that for a relatively large share of respondents, the own-people-first message is extreme and people respond to it by downplaying the issue of immigration. The effect is not strong however.

Figure 3. Within individual difference between measurement before and after elections in prioritization of reducing immigrants to the country as a function of exposure to narrative and question formulations on solidarity

