

THE POLITICS OF ISLAMOPHOBIA
EXAMINING THE CASE OF THE DUTCH PARTY FOR FREEDOM

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ABSTRACT

The victory of the Party for Freedom (PVV) in the recent 2023 Dutch General Elections after years of middling electoral outcomes presents a puzzling observation. The party's Islamophobic identity coupled with a seemingly rising trend in Islamophobic sentiment in the Netherlands suggests changes in such views within the populace may predict the party's electoral performance. This thesis undertakes a primarily theoretical and survey-based analysis of sociological and socio-psychological features based on Social-Structure and Personality research approaches, while incorporating historical circumstances and demographic makeups as potential explanatory factors for this stark change. The sociological context which may produce voters for a party like the PVV and the factors leading to the evolution of such an environment are discussed. In order to shore up the initial sociological inquiry, and to confirm more empirically whether Islamophobic sentiment and the PVV's instrumentalization of it tangibly contributes to their electoral outcomes, this paper includes an additional quantitative analysis. This section measures the impact that the prevalence of Islamophobic views within the Dutch voter population and people's identification of Islamophobic and xenophobic policies with the PVV, has had on the PVV's historical electoral performance. It is expected that a relatively strong correlation will be detected, signifying that Islamophobic sentiment, and the identification of related policy as an issue championed by the PVV, leads to voters supporting them, and as such the 2023 outcome is thus in line with this trend. We find that the factors do demonstrate tangible predictive value for the party's electoral outcomes.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Geert Wilders, the notorious anti-Islam right-wing populist that was famously dubbed ‘Dutch Trump’¹, made headlines after emerging victorious in the 2023 Dutch General Elections. For the first time, Wilders and his party, the Party for Freedom (PVV), were able to obtain 37 out of 150 seats in Parliament, the highest number since its foundation². Following six months of negotiations between the PVV and other Dutch parties,³ Wilders was successfully able to strike a deal with his coalition partners to form a new right-wing government,⁴ with plans to curtail immigration by introducing stricter measures for asylum seekers, remove family reunifications for refugees and limit the number of international students in the Netherlands.⁵ After years of middling electoral outcomes, the party’s stunning victory in the most recent elections presents a somewhat puzzling observation, especially considering the party’s vote share more than doubled since the previous election.

This thesis attempts to identify the factors responsible for this stark electoral improvement.

A common theme that has defined the PVV since its inception is the party’s stance on immigration and Islam in the Netherlands and Europe at large.⁶

¹ Sarah Wildman, “Geert Wilders, the Islamophobe Some Call the Dutch Donald Trump, Explained,” Vox, March 14, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/3/14/14921614/geert-wilders-islamophobia-islam-netherlands-populism-europe>.

² John Henley, Pjotr Sauer, and Senay Boztas, “Far-Right Party Set to Win Most Seats in Dutch Elections, Exit Polls Show,” The Guardian, November 22, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/22/far-right-party-set-to-win-most-seats-in-dutch-elections-exit-polls-show>.

³ Boztas, Senay. “Far-Right Geert Wilders Agrees Deal for Dutch Coalition Government.” The Guardian, May 15, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/15/far-right-geert-wilders-agrees-deal-dutch-coalition-government>.

⁴ Boztas, “Far-Right Geert”

⁵ “Dutch Government Veers Sharply Right after Four-Party Coalition Deal.” Euronews, May 16, 2024. <https://www.euronews.com/2024/05/16/four-right-wing-dutch-parties-to-form-government-in-coalition-deal>.

⁶ Vossen, Koen. “The Four Pillars of the PVV Ideology.” Essay. In *The Power of Populism: Geert Wilders and the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands*, 30–58. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017.

After resigning from the VVD (People's Party for Freedom and Democracy), Wilders began his decades long crusade against Islam,⁷ pushing to introduce radical policies in an attempt to “de-Islamify” the Netherlands, such as banning mosques, Islamic schools, headscarves and the Quran.⁸ Many studies in the literature explore Wilders's fixation on Islam, and how Islamophobia began taking root in Dutch society. The PVV is not alone in this view; many populist parties in Europe have followed the same trend, such as France's National Front, Germany's AfD, Austria's FPÖ, among others.⁹ One thing that all of these parties have repeatedly argued is that Islam poses a major threat to European culture and values, and must be eliminated by enforcing immigration and travel bans on Muslim countries. In the past, this view may not have been openly approved of, but for the past years Europe has seen noticeable increases in voter support for right-wing populist parties in many countries.¹⁰

The Netherlands is a recent addition to the growing number of European countries that have elected radical right-wing populist parties; for many, the victory of the PVV was especially shocking given the nation's tolerant image.¹¹

Simultaneously, increasing fear and hatred towards Muslims has been on the rise in Europe for the past decades, especially due to tensions stemming from the multiple large-scale terrorist attacks orchestrated by fundamentalist terrorist organizations, and reports of honor killings carried out by

⁷ Berend, Ivan T. “A ‘Freedom Fighter’ against the European Union: The Dutch Geert Wilders.” In *A Century of Populist Demagogues: Eighteen European Portraits, 1918–2018*, 255–74. Central European University Press, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7829/j.ctv16f6cn2.15>.

⁸ Vossen, The Four Pillars, 33

⁹ Roy, Oliver. “Islam and Elections in Europe.” IEMed, 2011. <https://www.iemed.org/publication/islam-and-elections-in-europe/>.

¹⁰ Silver, Laura. “Populist Parties Have Increased Their Vote Shares in Many Recent European Elections.” Pew Research Center, October 5, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/10/06/populists-in-europe-especially-those-on-the-right-have-increased-their-vote-shares-in-recent-elections/ft_2022-10-06_populists_01-png/.

¹¹ Kirby, Paul, and Anna Holligan. “Dutch Election: Anti-Islam Populist Geert Wilders Wins Dramatic Victory.” BBC News, November 23, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67504272>.

radicalized Muslim men.¹²The pre-existing fear coupled with the anti-Islamic messages pushed by right-wing parties seems to be fueling a growing hatred towards Muslim immigrants.

This paper first considers the historical circumstances surrounding Geert Wilders political ascent, and examines where his anti-Islam convictions arise, followed by a contextual overview of Muslim immigration to the Netherlands. Building on this, an inquiry into the sociological and social-psychological aspects leading to anti-Islam sentiment among the general population is conducted, focusing on factors such as feelings of alienation, persecution, and nativist tendencies. The paper then moves on to the empirical quantitative component of this research endeavor, first explaining the underlying theory and method, followed by a presentation and discussion of the findings. The overall aim is to understand the factors associated with the PVV's recent rise, and more specifically, to confirm whether the party's voteshare moves in-step with Islamophobic sentiment within the voting population, and as such is related to or even partly caused by the increase in anti-Islam sentiments amongst the Dutch population.

¹² "What Is Islamophobia?" Open Society Foundations, May 2019. <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/explainers/islamophobia-europe>.

CHAPTER 2: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Wilders and the PVV

Before jumping into the analysis and theory, it is relevant to examine Geert Wilders and his sour relationship with Islam. Long before he began his career in politics, Wilders had already started developing a dislike towards Islam; uninterested in studying or finishing high school, Wilders decided to travel the world. Due to his financial circumstances, he ended up traveling to Israel, where he stated that he “felt at home”¹³. From there he traveled to other neighboring Arab countries, which exposed him to predominantly Islamic societies for the first time. In 1985, Wilders moved to a district called Kanaleneiland in Utrecht, which boasted a high number of Turkish immigrants, many of whom were practicing Muslims. During this time, the Netherlands was experiencing a massive immigration wave from many former Dutch colonies in Asia and Africa, as well as other countries. He described the experience there as tough; claiming many non-Muslims were generally unwelcome, and that he suffered attacks and harassment. Wilders was supposedly a victim of such attacks, stating in an interview that during an outing he was followed by a group of people and was sprayed with some type of gas, then was beaten and robbed¹⁴.

His political career began in the conservative liberal *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie*, or the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD). Previously, he had worked in the government organ responsible for supervising the Dutch social security system; it was during this time that Wilders became aware of the major flaws and systemic abuses of the system, which led him to believe that the institution was sacrificing the interest of the public. This event contributed to his interest in politics, and in 1988 he decided to join the VVD.

¹³Berend, “*Freedom Fighter*”, 256

¹⁴ Berend, “*Freedom Fighter*”, 256

Throughout the early stages of his career, Wilders displayed moderate political views, supported the European Union, and even criticized a statement from populist anti-Islam politician Pim Fortuyn, who called for a “Cold War on Islam” in 2001.¹⁵ However, his stance changed after becoming a public spokesman for the VVD in 2002; Wilders became more outspoken with his criticisms of Islam, which clashed with the VVD’s stance towards Turkey’s request to join the EU. Wilders parted ways with the VVD in 2004 due to his disagreement with supporting Turkey, and established his own party called *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (Party for Freedom) or PVV. From this point onwards, he began a political crusade against Islam, calling for an end to the “Islamization of the Netherlands”¹⁶

Two major incidents catapulted his war against Islam; the events of 9/11 and the murders of prominent Dutch figures critical of Islam— Pim Fortuyn (2002) and anti-Islam filmmaker Theo van Gogh (2004). The filmmaker was killed by Islamic extremist Mohammed Bouyeri, after directing and releasing a short film titled *Submission Part 1*, in which women were depicted wearing transparent clothes with Quran verses written on their bodies. The documentary was created with the intention of shedding light on the violence against women in Islamic societies, and included testimonies of four Muslim women who suffered abuse at the hands of their spouses or family members¹⁷. Soon after van Gogh’s death, Wilders and Somali-born politician and co-director of the documentary, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, were targeted by Islamic extremists after receiving multiple death threats. Following this attack and others, Wilders continued to receive death threats and was

¹⁵ Berend, “*Freedom Fighter*”, 257

¹⁶ Berend, “*Freedom Fighter*”, 258

¹⁷ Jason Burke, “The Murder That Shattered Holland’s Liberal Dream,” *The Guardian*, November 7, 2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/nov/07/terrorism.religion>.

declared as the most threatened man in the Netherlands¹⁸; for more than 10 years, the politician has been placed under permanent protection, and cannot make public appearances without the use of a bulletproof vest and tight police security.

Although his life is seemingly in constant danger, it has also worked in his favor by increasing his popularity and appeal in the public sphere. Since the attack in November 2004, the PVV surged in national polls, and has enjoyed a gradual increase in strength over the past years. Wilders has undoubtedly utilized his anti-Islam stance as a primary tool in his political career, however he has also recognized that it has not been enough to obtain the voter support needed. As a populist, a key strategy that he has taken advantage of is the criticism of incumbent political leaders, who he has often accused of becoming a “self-satisfied political elite who lost their way”.¹⁹ He is also a notorious skeptic of the EU, a core element of his anti-establishment populist campaign. Despite his radical stances on immigration and intolerance towards the Muslim community in the Netherlands, he claims that he is not far-right in terms of his political views, and only seeks to represent the people.²⁰ He states that his primary concerns are the indigenous Dutch population, who he argues are being ignored by the state due to mass immigration. To improve his party’s image, Wilders released a statement in which he declared that the PVV’s manifesto plans to ban the Quran, mosques and Islamic Schools would be put on hold for the time being.²¹ This act of moderation may have helped increase the representation of his party in Parliament from 17 seats to even 37 in 2023, in which case, it would appear that this strategy of ‘playing both sides’ in a

¹⁸ Berend, “*Freedom Fighter*”, 260

¹⁹ Berend, “*Freedom Fighter*”, 266

²⁰ Paul Kirby, “Geert Wilders: Who Is He and What Does He Want?,” BBC News, November 23, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67506583>.

²¹ Paul Kirby and Anna Holligan, “Dutch Election: Anti-Islam Populist Geert Wilders Wins Dramatic Victory,” BBC News, November 23, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67504272>.

way and juggling competing interests may have worked for Wilders due to his original votebase's trust in his long-term political commitments.

Whatever his true political leanings may be, it is undeniable that his presence in Dutch politics has been defined by his views towards Islam and Muslim immigrants all around Europe. His outspoken and brazen attitude towards this religion in particular has caused outrage amongst the public, but it has also resonated with a growing number of people who share Wilders's views. The purpose of this thesis is to assess whether the PVV's recent success in the General Election of 2023 reflects an increase in Islamophobic views within Dutch society.

2.2 Islam in the Netherlands

Long before Geert Wilders, Pim Fortuyn and other anti-Islam politicians appeared on the scene, Dutch society's exposure to the religion was quite minimal. It was during the Dutch colonial period that Islam became a topic of study due to its presence in Indonesia; Dutch citizens who had frequent contact with Indonesian natives (such as missionaries, civil servants, and merchants) had to study Islam to be able to exercise control over the local population, and thus maintain control over the colony. According to an article written by W.A. Shadid for the 25th volume of *The International Migration Review*,¹⁴ Islamic scholars such as Snouck Hurgronje played an important role in advising policymakers tasked with managing the Dutch East Indies government. As a scholar and Dutch colonial officer, Hurgronje aimed to culturally incorporate Indonesia into the Dutch Empire. He published *Mekka vol.2*, an influential piece of work that re-explored the origins of Islam, its early traditions, and practices, as well as the first Islamic communities. The second

volume, translated into English in 1931, includes information on daily life in Islamic culture in the Indonesian Muslim colony at Mecca.²²

Although Hurgronje was tolerant towards Islamic life,²³ much of his work mirrored the negative and generalized views Dutch society held about Islam.²⁴ His duty as a colonial officer also influenced his policy on Islam, as a goal of the Dutch colonial project was to repress Islamic political agitation to maintain power over the region. Overall, Dutch views on Islam during this time were overtly negative, despite the theological interest amongst scholars.

The postcolonial era ushered in a new wave of immigration to the Netherlands, but much of the negative stereotypes associated with Islam remained the same. Prior to World War II, most of Dutch society was relatively unfamiliar with Muslims, however, this changed with the arrival of Indonesian groups in the late 1940s. They were accompanied by a smaller group of Molucca Muslims, who were traveling to the Hague as missionaries. A much larger influx of practicing Muslims emigrated to the Netherlands in the 60s and 70s, primarily from Turkey and Morocco, as well as from Suriname, Indonesia, Pakistan, Tunisia, and the Moluccas.

However, Shadid emphasizes the fact that the Muslim communities in the Netherlands were far from homogenous due to the ethnic and religious ideological diversity amongst Muslim immigrants. Followers of Islam fall into different categories, and making a distinction between them is not only relevant but also necessary.

Muslims primarily follow two main streams of Islam, Sunni and Shia, as well as the tributary streams, the Ahmadiyya and the Alawiyyah.²⁵ Not only are there different religious streams within

²² Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje." Encyclopedia Britannica, April 9, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Christiaan-Snouck-Hurgronje>.

²³ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "*Hurgronje*"

²⁴ W. A. Shadid, "The Integration of Muslim Minorities in the Netherlands," 358

²⁵ Qureshi. 2014. "The Four Schools of Law in Islam." Understanding Islam. February 7, 2014. <https://free-islamic-course.org/stageone/stageone-module-4/four-schools-law-islam.html>.

Islam, but there are also various Islamic schools (*madhhabs*) that interpret the Quran and Islamic law. The four prominent schools of law are: the Hanafiyya School, the Malikiyya School, the Shafiyy²⁶a School and the Hanbaliyya School.²⁷ These schools are all present in the Netherlands; Muslim can also be divided into different mystical associations known as *tariqa*, a Sufism practice which aims to seek truth and knowledge through spiritual means. Sufism is the major expression of mysticism in Islam, which also has different branches, such as the Qadiriyyah, the Naqshbandiyyah, the Darqawiyyah, and the Baktashyyah.²⁸ Shadid also mentions the distinction between religious-political movements, which were developed during the decolonization period, and aimed to reintroduce Islam into the political sphere as a foundation for the state. Many of these movements are tied to certain countries, which may ascribe to different interpretations of the Quran.

According to Shadid, these demarcations are important to keep in mind when developing policies of integration in host countries such as the Netherlands, which for the past two centuries has followed a unique approach towards religious diversity. The Netherlands has adopted certain policies on diversity, integration and social cohesion which have their roots in religious plurality laws developed in the end of the 19th century.²⁹ Known as the pillarization system, it was created to give religious groups the freedom to organize their communities and societal infrastructure along religious lines. This allowed members of different religious organizations to open schools,

²⁶ Shadid, *Integration*, 359

²⁷ Qureshi. "The Four Schools of Law in Islam."

²⁸ Cook, David. "Mysticism in Sufi Islam." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.51>.

²⁹ Shadid, *Integration*, 356-357

hospitals, and trade unions, and several institutions founded their religious and spiritual bases. All religious groups are categorized as pillars and Dutch society is organized along this system.

Although the pillar system was originally created due to the growing number of Christian denominations residing in the Netherlands during the latter half of the 19th century, Islam was eventually integrated as another pillar with the arrival of Muslim immigrants. Despite this positive advancement, Islam was and still is viewed in a generally negative light; a reoccurring opinion found in much of the literature used in this thesis is the view that Islam and Dutch culture are incompatible.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

Oztig et al.³⁰ examine the correlation between the surge of populism and Islamophobia in Europe, particularly evident through the significant electoral victories of anti-Islam political factions. Analyzing the strategies of the French National Front, the Alternative for Germany, and the Dutch Party for Freedom, this article argues that Islamophobic populism not only vilifies Muslims but also serves as a tool to challenge established political elites and thus operates as an effective electoral strategy. Comparing the three parties, the authors indicate that the central argument that is used by all is that Islam threatens European culture and values, calling for a ban on Muslim immigration to prevent the “Islamization” of their countries. Simultaneously, they target incumbent leaders who come from mainstream political parties that avoid divisive political messaging, accusing them of being neutral towards such a threat, and failing to implement policies to tackle this problem. By calling out incumbents, radical right-wing parties alienate them from a growingly distrustful public sphere, while simultaneously attracting more voters. This strategy is perfectly illustrated in the case of the PVV; Wilders’ political career is arguably built on the propagation of anti-Islamic rhetoric, designing his political campaigns around the idea that Islam is a threat to Dutch culture. This paper shows that instigating Islamophobia can function as an effective electoral strategy, which confirms that it can play a role in the increase of electoral outcomes for populist right-wing parties.

³⁰ Oztig, Lacin Idil, Turkan Ayda Gurkan, and Kenan Aydin. “The Strategic Logic of Islamophobic Populism.” *Government and Opposition* 56, no. 3 (July 2021): 446–64. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2019.35>.

Kešić and Duyvendak³¹ look at how right-wing discourses on belonging and collective identity in Europe are often understood in terms of Islamophobia, racism, and populism. However, the authors argue that this discourse is better understood through the lens of nativism, which is defined as intense opposition to internal minorities perceived as foreign threats. They identify three types: secularist nativism (targeting Islam), racial nativism (targeting black minorities), and populist nativism (targeting native elites). Using the Netherlands as a case study, the authors argue that nativism offers a more comprehensive lens for understanding these discourses across Europe. While this paper explains how Islamophobia should be understood as an extension, or consequence of nativism, the thesis builds on this by deepening the understanding of Islamophobia specifically within the case of the Netherlands as being a further development of various collective psychological states, such as resentment and alienation, which in turn may lead to nativist tendencies /which can eventually evolve into full-fledged Islamophobia.

In his book “A Century of Populist Demagogues”,³² Ivan T. Berend includes a brief overview of the life and political career of Geert Wilders in the chapter “A ‘freedom fighter’ against the European Union: the Dutch Geert Wilders”. Although it is relatively short, the text provides plenty of insightful information about Wilders and the origins of his career in Dutch politics, as well as the beginning of his fight against Islam. It lays out, in a chronological order, the major events in his life that guided him to politics and it showcases how Wilders gradually came to change his views towards the European Union, Islam and Muslim immigrants in Europe. However, the source

³¹ Kešić, Josip, and Jan Willem Duyvendak. “The Nation under Threat: Secularist, Racial and Populist Nativism in the Netherlands.” *Patterns of Prejudice* 53, no. 5 (October 20, 2019): 441–63. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322x.2019.1656886>.

³² Berend, Ivan T. “A ‘Freedom Fighter’ against the European Union: The Dutch Geert Wilders.” In *A Century of Populist Demagogues: Eighteen European Portraits, 1918–2018*, 255–74. Central European University Press, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7829/j.ctv16f6cn2.15>.

is mostly a biography of his life, and does not go into much detail about the history of his party, the PVV. It focuses more on his connection to Islam. Another source which goes into further detail about Geert's political career and the beginnings of the PVV is a chapter in Koen Vossen's "The Power of Populism". Titled "The four pillars of the PVV: The PVV's ideology", this chapter dives even deeper into Wilders' early political career and the foundational values of the PVV. This text reveals that besides the party's fight against Islam, there are three other central things the PVV promises to fight for: the native Dutch people who feel abandoned by the government, the promotion and fostering Dutch nationalist sentiment, and increasing measures of law enforcement to increase security in the Netherlands. These core points, neatly wrapped up in the chapter, provide vital clues that explain many of the proposed policies in several of Geert Wilders' manifestos. Vossen condenses years of the PVV's history into comprehensible sections, and sheds a light on the specific strategies that the party has implemented over the years to appeal to its voter base, and attract more individuals who may feel deep dissatisfaction towards incumbent leaders,

"The Integration of Muslim Minorities in the Netherlands" by W. A. Shadid is an article published in the 25th edition of the International Migration Review, and it aims to explore the history of Dutch perceptions and views on Islam, from the colonial period to the postcolonial period. It also discussed the judicial and social obstacles that Muslim minorities encounter in Dutch society. Apart from providing a brief overview of the timeline of Muslim immigration to the Netherlands, it also looks at the policies of integration implemented by the Dutch government, and their inability to tackle socioeconomic integration as effectively as the judicial system. Although several laws have been implemented to allow Dutch Muslims to practice Islam more freely, these efforts have not translated into the social and economic sphere, which presents more obstacles that sabotage

the integration process. This article states that Dutch society oftentimes conflates Islamic fundamentalism, which is a term that has been overutilized without sufficient nuance in the West, with religious traditionalism. This misconception stems from the belief that Islam is a violent and fanatical religion and poses an inherent danger to Western society. Koen's chapter on the PVV also discusses this issue; for years, Wilders has argued that Islam, in accordance with the rules in the Quran, is a totalitarian political ideology that seeks to conquer the world through religious conversion.³³ This belief, while not widely shared, is an example of the types of perceptions that have been formed in the Netherlands towards Muslims and generates a certain type of fear in the public. Overall, both papers are relevant to understand some of the social barriers Dutch Muslims face, as well as the types of negative perceptions that follow them within Dutch society. Although both papers demonstrate that Islamophobic

Two studies conducted in 2015 and 2021 were crucial to understanding how and why voters gravitate towards populist right-wing politics. Kemmers et al.³⁴ conducted qualitative interviews to understand how citizens reject established politics due to political dissatisfaction and turn to populist anti-establishment parties instead. The process that many of the interviewees experienced showed a specific and replicable pattern, roughly going across three stages: 'introduction', 'validation', and 'consolidation'. Together, this thesis and the Kemmers study help paint a better picture of what the potential consequences of political dissatisfaction can lead to and highlights specific emotions and behavioral patterns that could be indicative of broader political discontent

³³ Vossen, Koen. "The Four Pillars of the PVV Ideology ." Essay. In *The Power of Populism: Geert Wilders and the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands*, 30–58. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017

³⁴ Kemmers, Roy, Jeroen van der Waal, and Stef Aupers. "Becoming Politically Discontented: Anti-Establishment Careers of Dutch Nonvoters and PVV Voters." *Current Sociology* 64, no. 5 (July 9, 2016): 757–74. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392115609651>.

in society. Hartevelde et al.³⁵ analyze and compare voting behavior in urban and rural areas in the Netherlands to see how support for the PVV is distributed across different locations. It argues that patterns of PVV support can be explained by social anxiety produced by drastic social change. Economic hardship, local marginalization and the influx of immigrants are three potential factors influencing this anxiety amongst the native Dutch locals, and thus driving them to vote for parties such as the PVV. The findings of the study show that the presence of immigrants and their growing numbers can explain why radical populist parties are more popular in some urban areas but cannot account for rural areas due to other issues that have an impact on voter behavior, such as local marginalization (loss of public services due to funding, the exodus of young, educated people to urban areas). The study posits that to understand why people support the populist radical right, it is important to recognize the heterogeneity of the voter base and their context-specific needs. Both studies show that between 2015 and 2021, not much has changed in terms of political dissatisfaction, and that support for populist right-wing parties continues to grow. They also show that the right-wing voter base has a myriad different reason for choosing to vote for parties like the PVV, and that this factor should not be dismissed as simply political deviance. This thesis expands on these findings by considering these developments within the specific context of Islamophobia and explores it as one of the many reasons voters might have for siding with the PVV come election-time. Kemmers et al. mentions that some of the PVV voters who participated in the interview agree with Wilders' stance on Islam, but there is little information that engages with the relationship between Islamophobia and PVV awareness. The Hartevelde et al. study investigates the role of immigration, but focuses on it generally, and does not employ Islamophobia

³⁵ HARTEVELDE, EELCO, WOUTER VAN DER BRUG, SARAH DE LANGE, and TOM VAN DER MEER. "Multiple Roots of the Populist Radical Right: Support for the Dutch PVV in Cities and the Countryside." *European Journal of Political Research* 61, no. 2 (May 5, 2021): 440–61. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12452>.

at any given moment. Overall, these studies provide valuable insights that have informed the analysis conducted in this thesis on the potential impacts of Islamophobia on right-wing electoral success.

CHAPTER 4: SOCIOLOGICAL INQUIRY

Understanding the rise of Islamophobic tendencies in Dutch society is a complex process, for which this thesis relies on both quantitative and qualitative methods, both deriving from an empirical basis. The qualitative component involves survey results, sociological and historical research, and analysis of political party ideology and messaging.

Considering the voting behavior and political views of Dutch people is necessary to understanding how anti-Islam and xenophobic rhetoric has evolved over time, but it is also relevant to explore other driving factors that cannot be analyzed solely through quantitative research. Particularly, it is integral to understand the psychology of the average right-wing populist voter, and the sociological context that renders them susceptible to such rhetoric.

Following the 2021 elections, the PVV obtained more than double the number of votes in the recent elections.³⁶ This impressive increase merits further exploration, however the focus of this thesis calls for a deeper sociological analysis, which requires a theoretical framework. Salmela and von Scheve³⁷ discuss psychological theories that explain why people gravitate to the right, and how right-wing parties use this to their advantage to increase voter support. The first theory posits that emotions and the specific feeling of resentment and *ressentiment* (French term coined by Nietzsche and developed by Scheler) play a big role in pushing certain sectors of society to the right. Due to the drastic changes brought about by globalization and modernization, socioeconomic conditions have drastically changed in many countries around the world, and these changes have

³⁶ Henley, John, Pjotr Sauer, and Senay Boztas. "Far-Right Party Set to Win Most Seats in Dutch Elections, Exit Polls Show." *The Guardian*, November 22, 2023.

³⁷ Salmela, Mikko, and Christian Von Scheve. "Emotional Roots of Right-Wing Political Populism." *Social Science Information* 56, no. 4 (December 2017): 567–95. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0539018417734419>.

not benefited everyone equally.³⁸ Some of those on the ‘losing end’ of this new system experience insecurity about their identity, alienation from society, and develop distrust in mainstream politics and the democratic system of the nation.³⁹ Due to the competitive and individualistic nature of capitalist societies, the sense of inadequacy triggered by a perceived sense of failure to meet the standards of such a society leads to shame, which when repressed, develops into anger which is often directed towards out-groups. This, coupled with a sense of shared victimhood (which is crucial for mobilization) leads these groups to look for answers from the right. Radical right-wing populists appeal to these sentiments, proposing practical, simple, and straightforward solutions that target the out-groups who bear the brunt of the anger from these groups.

This framework can be applied to the case of the Netherlands for several reasons. Among the available questions in the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study (DPES)⁴⁰ surveys, many tackles specific topics that indicate that there is a feeling of resentment and alienation among the population, and in more ways than one. For example, the 2012 survey⁴¹ included options such as (1) “*I am afraid my own financial prospects will deteriorate*”, (2) “*Only few people I can really talk to*”, (3) “*I often feel abandoned*”, (4) “*Nobody is interested in me.*”

The results of these prompts showed that out of 1677 responses:

1. 208 and 616 answered: *Fully Agree/Agree*

³⁸ Salmela, Mikko, and Christian von Scheve. “Emotional Roots of Right-Wing Political Populism.” *Social Science Information* 56, no. 4 (December 1, 2017): 567–95. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0539018417734419>.

³⁹ Salmela, von Scheve. “Emotional Roots”, 5

⁴⁰ T.W.G. van der Meer, H. van der Kolk, and R. Rekker. “Dutch Parliamentary Election Study 2017 (DPES/NKO 2017).” DANS Data Station Social Sciences and Humanities, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.17026/dans-xby-5dhs>.

⁴¹ Stichting Kiezersonderzoek Nederland – SKON, Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek - CBS, H. van der Kolk, J.N. Tillie, P. van Erkel, M. van der Velden, and A. Damstra. “Dutch Parliamentary Election Study 2012 - DPES 2012.” DANS Data Station Social Sciences and Humanities, 2012. <https://doi.org/10.17026/dans-x5h-akds>.

2. 61 and 243 answered: *Fully Agree/Agree*
3. 12 and 58: *Fully Agree/Agree*
4. 22 and 50 answered: *Fully Agree/Agree*

In 2017,⁴² the DPES survey included topics such as: (1) *Politicians do not care about the people*, (2) *Politicians in the Hague do not care about my region*, (3) *MPs do not care about opinions of people like me*, and (4) *People like me have no influence over politics*.

The results showed that out of 3,107 respondents:

1. 83 and 417 answered: *Strongly Agreed/Agreed*
2. 215 and 791 answered: *Strongly Agreed/Agreed*
3. 1,045 (out of 3,114) answered: *True*
4. 1,323 (out of 3,114) answered: *True*

Finally, in the 2017-2021 DPES Panel study,⁴³ which recorded responses across 6 waves of surveys, out of the 3,939 people who answered the prompt “*People like me have no influence over politics*”, waves 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6 showed that:

Wave 1: 522 responded *True*

Wave 2: 405 responded *True*

Wave 4: 500 responded *True*

Wave 5: 233 responded *True*

⁴² T.W.G. van der Meer, H. van der Kolk, and R. Rekker. “Dutch Parliamentary Election Study 2017 (DPES/NKO 2017).” DANS Data Station Social Sciences and Humanities, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.17026/dans-xby-5dhs>.

⁴³ Meer, Tom van der, and Vivien Fabry. “Dutch Parliamentary Election Study (DPES) Panel Data 2017-2021 (6 waves).” DANS Data Station Social Sciences and Humanities, April 1, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.17026/SS/BJKU4B>.

Wave 6: 469 responded *True*

These examples, as well as others, indicate that there is a substantial number of people in the Netherlands who exhibit some characteristics of alienation and distrust towards political institutions. From this information, it is reasonable to believe that within the pool of Dutch voters, a certain sector feels disproportionately neglected by the government, or does not feel like their voices are being represented. While there are many reasons that citizens can feel this way about their government, topics such as the ones displayed by the aforementioned survey prompts tell us specific things about the Dutch population that we can see in the resentment theory. Although there is always a general dissatisfaction with political institutions in every society, the DPES survey shows that not only is there a large number of respondents that feel abandoned by Dutch politicians, it also tells us that they have little to no faith in the government, which signals that their political discontent goes beyond general disapproval with the way the state runs things. It shows that there are a significant number of people who strongly believe that the government does not care about them and does not act in the interest of people like them.

Political discontent can be a powerful tool that, when strong enough, motivates people to mobilize to generate political change.⁴⁴ In the case of the Netherlands, we can observe that a good number of people feel increasing distrust towards Parliament, providing political parties with strong anti-establishment leanings a strong opportunity to grow.

Kemmers et al. examines how citizens reject established politics due to political dissatisfaction, and turn to populist anti-establishment parties instead. Through in-depth personal interviews, the

⁴⁴ Salmela, Von Scheve. "Emotional Roots", 5

authors set up a linear process that many of the interviewees reported experiencing, corroborating a social pattern through which they come to reject the established political order. First, they develop objections to the institution, leading them to further develop their insights through independent research and alternative media, and finally consolidating their newfound insight by making changes in media consumption that aligns with their beliefs, finally, reinterpreting past experiences through this newly acquired worldview. Radical parties like the PVV are attractive to such people because they voice many of the complaints that are shared amongst this group of dissatisfied individuals, validating their objections with the system while also building a sense of community amongst like minded people. In many of his manifestos, Wilders adopts specific patterns of political behavior, such as accusing incumbents and political rivals of elitism, promising to fight for common Dutch values which are allegedly disappearing, and eliminating out-groups that are perceived as threats. Like any true populist, Wilders attracts voters through a public persona that ordinary people can relate to. He uses everyday discourse to tackle issues established parties often avoid with drastic policy proposals, such as banning Muslim immigration, revoking Dutch citizenship from convicted naturalized citizens, increasing security, etc. Many of these proposals are radical and infringe on basic human and political rights, and most moderate governments would be unwilling to adopt them; however, it is these types of simple and seemingly effective solutions that attract voters with limited understanding of public policy.

He, like many other populists, understands what his audience wants, appeals to their complaints about incumbents, and targets prominent out-groups, who are primarily Muslim immigrants. According to Berend (p.265), Wilders does not attack all immigrants and minorities; he is generally positive towards immigrants from certain backgrounds, primarily the Hungarian, Czech

and Polish migrants who emigrated to the Netherlands during the interwar period and the 1950s and 60s. Additionally, he has shown to be quite accepting towards Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants. Oftentimes, his primary targets are Moroccan and Turkish immigrants. In 2014, Wilders was even convicted for ‘inciting discrimination against Moroccans’ after promising to his supporters that there would be fewer Moroccans in the Netherlands. His trial was dismissed in 2016 and he emerged victorious, as not only did he leave without facing jail time or a fine, he also gained more public attention which gave him a platform to further criticize political institutions for infringing on his right to free speech. (cite) Many viewed this trial as another publicity stunt for the PVV, and it was largely deemed a failure.

Despite the fact that most of his policy proposals are concerned with identity politics, limiting immigration and distancing the Netherlands from the EU, Wilders still managed to attract a shocking number of supporters within two years, beating other prominent right-wing parties like the VVD and the FvD. The increase of supporters indicate that there are underlying issues within Dutch society that push people to vote for the radical right, which Salmela and von Scheve argue is an expression of deep seated resentment brought about by the negative effects of globalization and increased competitiveness under capitalism.

CHAPTER 5: QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

5.1 Theory

Right wing populist parties often instrumentalize widespread perceptions of Islam and Muslims as threats in order to mobilize potential voters.¹⁶ The PVV is well known for their consistent position regarding the threat Islam ostensibly poses to Dutch norms and values. Islamophobic sentiment, then, has formed a key component of their electoral campaigning strategy, and Islamophobic individuals a key component of their primary votebase. As such, it would be natural if variations in the prevalence of Islamophobic sentiment would have significant impacts on the PVV's vote share. While ideological considerations such as islamophobia don't usually change year-on-year at the micro-level, the prevalence of such views within a population can change significantly depending on various factors. As such, variations in Islamophobic sentiment may serve as an important catalyst for corresponding changes in the PVV's electoral performance. In order to quantify the true extent of impact such variations can present on the PVV's electoral outcomes, a quantitative analysis comparing the PVV's vote share with the prevalence of anti-Islam sentiment in the general Dutch voting population would be ideal. However, simply holding Islamophobic views is not sufficient by itself to mobilize voters. Voters must also be aware which specific party's policy positions align with their own preferences. Political parties such as the PVV have expended significant effort in making this link clear to the public, and the success of these efforts is supported by the issue ownership statistics published by the Dutch Parliamentary Election Survey, which indicates that issues such as immigration and discrimination are most strongly associated with the PVV. As such, the specific calculus of prevalent Islamophobic views and strong party profile awareness at the national level is necessary for parties such as the PVV to have strong electoral

performances. As such, changes in both would ideally together explain variations in the PVV's electoral outcomes, specifically, their vote shares.

Thus, the study primarily evaluates one hypothesis:

H1: Variations in prevalence levels of Islamophobic sentiment and awareness of PVV's political commitments reflect variations in the party's vote share.

Further, in order to identify whether the effect of anti-Islam sentiment can be isolated from general anti-minority sentiment, a further analysis is conducted, providing the second hypothesis:

H2: General anti-minority sentiment is not as significantly responsible for the PVV's electoral performance as anti-Islam sentiment.

5.2 Research Design

This study relies on the theoretical assumption that the PVV's public anti-Islam stance is a key factor motivating their voters. However, prevalence of anti-Islam or anti-minority sentiment by ⁴⁵itself is not a sufficient predictor by itself, since awareness of the PVV's policies is necessary for voters to go from policy-preference recognition, to vote-choice in favor of a specific party. Consequently, the study conducts a simple linear regression analysis evaluating whether Islamophobic sentiment and awareness of the PVV's anti-minority stance can explain changes in the PVV's vote share. Additionally, the study further conducts another simple linear regression analysis evaluating whether general anti-minority sentiment similarly correlates with the PVV's vote share, in order to evaluate whether anti-Islam sentiment uniquely impacts the PVV's performance.

⁴⁵ Öztürk and Pickel, 2019

The study relies on data from the years 2010⁴⁶, 2012, 2017, and 2021, as these align with all General Elections since the PVV's founding excluding their first year when the party's public profile and awareness was limited, and the most recent elections for which data is not yet available. We use no control variables since nearly unlimited factors can have minor confounding effects on both Islamophobic sentiment and the PVV's voter outcomes such as economic and housing conditions, immigration volume, etc., however, future research conducted at larger scale and capability could consider controlling for such variables.

This study hopes to demonstrate that Islamophobia in the Netherlands is directly correlated with PVV's performance in elections. If this is the case, then we can infer that the PVV (and potentially other populist right-wing parties) have found an effective way to instrumentalize Islamophobia to gain more supporters. Although similar studies may have been published, the 2023 Dutch General Elections and the formation of a new right-wing coalition government are very recent developments which invite further speculation regarding factors influencing the drastic change in the PVV's performance, and shows that there is a lot of new ground to cover in the Dutch case.

Independent Variable

The first independent variable (ISLAMOPHOBIA) utilized in this study is the prevalence of Islamophobic sentiment within the population. This is operationalised here and measured through the use of variables derived from the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study (DPES). In the study's 2010 edition, participants were asked whether they believed the immigration of Muslims should be stopped, and in later-years, this question was substituted for one asking whether respondents believed the government should actively prevent the construction of new mosques. While these

⁴⁶ H. Kolk, C.W.A.M. Aarts, J.N. Tillie, Stichting Kiezersonderzoek Nederland – SKON, and Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek - CBS. "Nationaal Kiezersonderzoek, NKO 2010." DANS Data Station Social Sciences and Humanities, 2012. <https://doi.org/10.17026/dans-xvh-tghy>.

are not the same thing, and the 2010 question is likely a much higher bar for Islamophobia, this study elects to use results from the two distinct questions across years to code Islamophobia in this analysis since the survey seemingly consider the latter a spiritual successor, and due to these being the only direct sources of measuring Islamophobic sentiment in the Netherlands. As such, the percentage of respondents answering ‘agree’ or ‘fully agree’ to the immigration of muslims question in 2010, and to the prevention of the construction of new mosques question in 2012, 2017, and 2021, is used as indicative of the prevalence of slamophobic sentiment for each of those years respectively.

The second independent variable (AWARENESS), meant to measure public awareness regarding the PVV’s positions on minorities, is similarly operationalised using the DPES. The study prompts respondents to choose what they consider to be each prominent party’s position on certain issues, among them one regarding the assimilation of foreigners. The specific question asked is *“In the Netherlands some think that foreigners should be able to live in the Netherlands while preserving their own culture. Others think that they should fully adapt to the Dutch culture. Where would you place the following parties on a line from 1 to 7, where 1 means preservation of own culture for foreigners and 7 means that they should fully adapt?”*

This study takes the percentage of respondents selecting response option 7 as indicative of the voting population’s awareness of the PVV’s positions relating to minorities.

Finally, for the separate regression analysis regarding general anti-minority sentiment, another variable from the DPES is utilized. In each year under consideration here, the respondents were asked to list what they considered the most important national problem. Their responses were then coded and assigned to various categories. One of these categories is ‘minorities’. Responses coded as this category seem to identify the very existence of minorities, primarily naming Muslims, but

also more nebulous but charged titles such as ‘foreigners’, ‘asylum seekers’, and ‘outsiders’, as being ‘problems’ in themselves. General anti-minority sentiment is operationalised here based on the percentage of responses to this question which included ‘minorities’ as one of the most important national problems in each year. While none of these are perfect indicators, within the context of the DPES survey and Dutch political discourse, these variables should align closely with the views they are intended to represent.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable for this study is meant to measure the PVV’s electoral performance. While seat-share is quite important in the Dutch electoral system, vote share is more closely related to micro-level preference expression; changes in which more closely resemble public opinion regarding expressed policy positions. As such, this study looks at the percentage of the overall vote that the PVV was able to win in the election years 2010, 2012, 2017, and 2021.

5.3 Findings

The initial regression analysis assessing the impact of ISLAMOPHOBIA and AWARENESS on VOTESHARE yielded an Adjusted R-Square value of .974, and an F value of 56.269 at a p-value of 0.094. At an α value of 0.10, we can say the results show a strong and relatively significant correlation between the independent variables and dependent variable.

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.996 ^a	.991	.974	.39415

a. Predictors: (Constant), ISLAMOPHOBIA, AWARENESS

Table i: Regression analysis model summary 1

ANOVA^a

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	17.483	2	8.742	56.269	.094 ^b
	Residual	.155	1	.155		
	Total	17.639	3			

a. Dependent Variable: VOTESHARE

b. Predictors: (Constant), ISLAMOPHOBIA, AWARENESS

Table ii: Regression analysis ANOVA results 1

The second regression analysis between MINORITIES and VOTESHARE on the other hand only yielded an R Square of .204, and an F value of .513 at a p value of .548. In this case, we can accept the null hypothesis.

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.452 ^a	.204	-.194	2.64914

Table iii: Regression analysis model summary 2

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	3.603	1	3.603	.513	.548 ^b
	Residual	14.036	2	7.018		
	Total	17.639	3			

a. Dependent Variable: Voteshare

b. Predictors: (Constant), MINORITIES

Table iv: Regression analysis ANOVA results 2

5.4 Discussion

The findings suggest that the initial model shows the independent variables strongly correlate with the dependent variable, however, at a significance level not conventionally considered especially statistically significant. However, within the context of our research goals and context, the outcome is sufficiently statistically significant to accept the alternative hypothesis. Due to the small sample size (4 case years), the relatively outlier case of 2010, and the unpredictable, multifaceted, and especially erratic nature of voting behavior, we chose to implement a significance level at 0.10.

The second model shows little to no correlation, with essentially no statistical significance. This outcome interestingly suggests that variations in perceptions of minorities as a ‘problem’ don’t strongly correlate with variations in the PVV’s vote share, suggesting that anti-Islam sentiment is especially unique. Interestingly, however, both seem to follow somewhat similar trends (See Fig. 1 and 2). Perhaps future research could focus on examining this relationship in more detail.

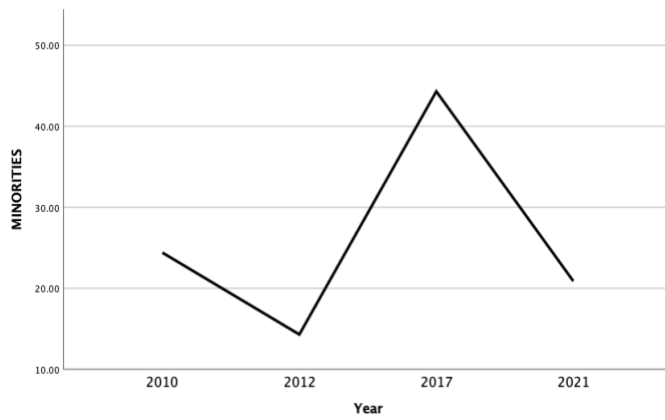


Figure a: MINORITIES variable trend line-graph

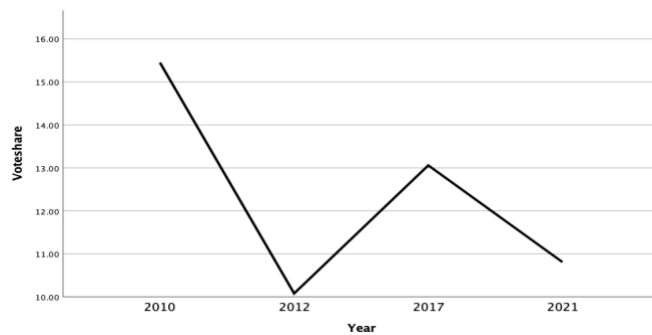


Figure b: PVV vote share trend line-graph

The success of the initial model suggests that Islamophobic sentiment and awareness of the PVV's policies together partly explain variations in the PVV's electoral outcomes. This suggests that the party's shock win in the 2023 General Election might reasonably be interpreted to represent a significant increase in Islamophobic sentiment within Dutch society. However, it is possible that other factors, such as Geert Wilders recently publicly moderating his stances, could have improved his party's standing, essentially bucking the historical trend detected here. Another potential factor we could point to is the collapse of the VVD coalition over migration policy disputes. Future research could evaluate such largely intangible factors through qualitative research approaches.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Through a combination of socio-psychological inquiry and quantitative analysis, the study has found that rising levels of alienation, social isolation, and feelings of persecution and exclusion contribute to susceptibility to populist rhetoric, Islamophobic views, and attraction towards parties such as the PVV. Further, the relatively significant correlation between Islamophobic sentiment and vote shares of parties associated with anti-minority positions—the PVV in particular here—shows that such parties have successfully instrumentalized Islamophobia as a mobilization tool to attract a specific subset of people who already feel isolated and threatened. Finally, it is discovered that anti-Islamic sentiment is an especially potent signifier of electoral outcomes for the PVV compared to general anti-minority sentiment. This signals that Islamophobia is uniquely, and openly utilized by the PVV to attract voters , and suggests significant ramifications and implications for Muslim members of Dutch society in the future considering the advent of the PVV's rule. This research also helps understand the conditions that lead to populist right wing parties such as the PVV coming to power, and the ways in which they effectively instrumentalize narratives of hate. Such narratives may serve to create bubbles where hate and Islamophobia further grows unchecked, and is even encouraged by the state, potentially worsening societal polarization and political discontent. Beyond helping understand the phenomenon of the rise in right wing populism and Islamophobia both in the Netherlands and Europe in general, the findings have implications for understanding how to combat such populist strategies.

However, the quantitative analysis conducted does not employ any control variables, is restricted to a small sample, and elects not to employ any mechanistic variables or process-tracing methods. As such, the generalizability and reliability of the results is limited, and future research could be focused on more rigorously confirming the findings of this study. Additional qualitative research could be focused more deeply on the psychosocial conditions leading to the evolution of these environments which are ripe for exploitation by populist figures.

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