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# A trade-off between the employment of older and younger workers? An historical approach to the political framing and reframing of labour market crowding out in the Dutch welfare state

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## ABSTRACT

Against a background of population ageing, rising welfare state costs, and the potential for intergenerational conflict, there is continued belief in the unsubstantiated idea that older and younger workers crowd each other out in the labour market. Taking a longitudinal approach, we historically describe the framing and reframing of the idea of crowding out in Dutch political discourse between 1977–2017. Using a rich dataset of all political party manifestos for this period, we demonstrate the continued belief in employment as a zero-sum game, highlighting how this idea is politically framed and reframed against a backdrop of political and institutional welfare state development. These findings offer empirical evidence on an under-researched topic, providing insights into political and policymaking processes.


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**KEYWORDS** Crowding out; political framing; ideas; intergenerational; retirement

## Introduction

Already prior to the COVID19 pandemic, many countries struggled to address significant economic and social pressures resulting from population ageing, including rising health care costs and declining social security contributions (e.g. Bloom et al., 2015). These struggles are presumed to challenge intergenerational solidarity, leading to a generational

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conflict over the distribution of resources, although the empirical evidence on the existence of such a conflict is mixed (Blome, Keck, & Alber, 2009; Prinzen, 2017). In response to these pressures, many OECD countries are raising the retirement age (Axelrad & Mahoney, 2017). This policy response can lead to significant social and political tensions (Bloom et al., 2015) given a long-standing belief that increasing the retirement age will worsen the labour market situation for younger workers, ‘crowding them out’ in favour of older workers. The belief in age-related crowding out could, therefore, be fuel for a real or imagined intergenerational conflict within society.

Age-related crowding out, i.e. the idea that older workers crowd out younger workers, is widespread in a number of European countries (Kemmerling, 2016). The notion that there is a trade-off between older and younger workers is loosely based on the idea that the labour market is a zero-sum game, whereby older workers who remain in the labour market for longer periods hamper the employment opportunities of younger workers (Gruber, Milligan, & Wise, 2010). This idea continues to exist despite little theoretical and empirical support (Banks, Blundell, Bozio, & Emmerson, 2010; Jousten, Lefèbvre, Perelman, & Pestieau, 2010; Munnell & Wu, 2012; Van den Berge et al., 2018). Academic interest in the societal belief in age-related crowding remains very limited (Kemmerling, 2016) and to our knowledge, the *political* belief in this phenomenon has yet to be studied. The absence of research on the political belief in age-related crowding out is problematic because ideas can be powerful in policy and societal processes (Béland, 2016). Continued political belief in age-related crowding out could contribute to an undermining of intergenerational solidarity, being one factor in a complex interaction of political, economic, and cultural factors that shape attitudes towards younger and older generations (Daatland, Veenstra, & Herlofson, 2012; Goerres & Tepe, 2010). In the politically and societally contentious topic of population ageing and the steps necessary to curb the effects of this process, understanding the political idea of age-related crowding out can therefore be of key importance.

We contribute to these scientific and societal debates by providing one of the first studies to investigate the political belief in age-related crowding out. We ask: How is the idea of age-related crowding out framed and reframed in Dutch political discourse across time and why? We study all political party manifestos used in election campaigns between 1977 (the start of early retirement policies) and 2017 within the context of key policy changes and welfare trends in the same period, which allows us

to provide an in-depth, historical analysis. Such empirical analysis increases scientific understanding of an understudied phenomenon of societal importance, contributing to academic knowledge on how changing political representations of an empirically contested idea have the potential to influence policy and societal debates. We first provide an overview of key background information on (early) retirement policies in the Netherlands before outlining our theoretical framework around ideas and framing and introducing the material and methods for analysis. The results section is twofold, starting with a description of the framing of age-related crowding out across time, followed by a discussion of potential explanatory mechanisms behind this framing. We conclude by discussing the limitations and implications of our research.

### **Age-related labour market policies in the Netherlands**

Historically there have been considerable discrepancies between the statutory retirement age and the average effective age of retirement in the Netherlands. The statutory retirement age in the Netherlands was 65 when the basic pay-as-you-go state pension was introduced in 1956. In 2012, following a long discussion about the financial sustainability of the pension system, the statutory retirement age was set to gradually increase until 2023, before keeping pace with life expectancy. In 2019, however, a Pension Agreement between the government and the social partners (centrally organised employers and trade unions) was reached, thereby freezing the retirement age at 66 years and 4 months for the next two years and ensuring the retirement age will increase less rapidly in the coming years.

The average effective age of retirement has historically been much lower, a discrepancy that existed in particular due to the tradition of early retirement schemes, initially introduced in the mid-1970s (Euwals, van Vuren, & van Vuuren, 2011; Oude Nijhuis, 2019). Early exit pathways for older (more expensive) workers further contributed to discrepancies between statutory and average effective retirement ages, which were created through misuse of the disability and unemployment schemes (Oude Nijhuis, 2019). Consequently, while the statutory retirement age was 65, in reality the effective retirement age was closer to 60 years and the labour force participation rate of workers aged 55 and over hovered around 30% until the mid-1990s (OECD, 2014b). Just prior to the far-reaching reforms of early exit pathways (i.e. reforms making pathways into early retirement less attractive) in the

early 2000s, approximately 40% of workers between 60 and 64 years of age received early retirement benefits in the Netherlands (Euwals et al., 2011). Since these reforms, the labour force participation rate of older workers aged 55-64 increased from 39% in 2000 to 72% in 2019 (OECD, 2020) and in 2018 the average effective retirement age was 65.2 and 62.5 years for men and women respectively (OECD, 2019).

The shifts in effective and statutory retirement ages in the Netherlands have been accompanied by considerable social and political tensions. When early retirement schemes were first introduced, youth unemployment was very high due to the persistent effects of the oil crises in combination with an inflexible labour market and inflexible wages (Visser & Hemerijck, 1997). Early retirement was meant to facilitate young people's employment, yet the idea was initially met with scepticism (Oude Nijhuis, 2019). Despite this, these schemes expanded and became perceived as an individual social right (Euwals et al., 2011; Oude Nijhuis, 2019), making later reforms (i.e. cutbacks) to early exit pathways difficult. The decline and eventual abolishment of tax benefits for early retirement in 2006 was thus highly contested and accompanied by significant protests (EIR-Online, 2004; Euwals et al., 2011).

In the years that followed, several factors threatened to negatively impact the employment of older workers. Concurrent reforms to unemployment and disability benefits made it easier to dismiss older workers. Older workers were also harder hit by the economic recession of 2008–2014 than other workers. Moreover, wage costs for older and younger workers can differ substantially in the Netherlands as a result of age-based minimum wages, long and steep tenure-based wage profiles in collective labour agreements (Deelen, 2012), age-based pension premiums,<sup>1</sup> and age-based protective rights in collective labour agreements.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, age-wage profiles are steeper than age-productivity profiles, which can make employers feel that older workers are comparatively more expensive and less productive than younger workers (Van Dalen, Henkens, & Schippers, 2010). At the same time, the labour market position of younger workers has also been negatively affected by various developments. Comparatively, the Netherlands has a high youth employment rate and youth employment was less affected by the global financial crisis in the Netherlands than in other countries. Yet the employment of youth decreased more than total employment during the crisis, showing a relatively greater impact on younger workers. Moreover, younger workers often face considerably more insecure labour market positions than older workers given the prevalence of temporary contracts (Fagan,

Kanjuo-Mrčela, & Norman, 2012; OECD, 2020). These social and political tensions form the backdrop for analysing the framing and reframing of age-related crowding out in Dutch political discourse in historical perspective.

### **Ideas and discourse: Explaining the framing of age-related crowding out**

To investigate and understand the political framing of age-related crowding out, we draw briefly on economic theory behind crowding out before focusing on policy-based and sociological approaches to the framing of ideas and political discourse. Basic economic theory assumes that labour markets function efficiently and predicts crowding out does not occur at the macro-economic level in the long-term (Cahuc, Carcillo, & Zylberberg, 2014). Empirical analyses support this theory: In reality, while younger and older workers are not perfect substitutes in skills and knowledge, there is no empirical evidence of crowding out taking place between younger and older workers at the macro level. Multiple single country studies even find the opposite: more options to retire early reduces the labour market participation of older workers and is associated with *increased* youth unemployment (see, e.g. studies in Gruber & Wise, 2010). Most empirical studies find a small, positive relationship or no relationship at all between the employment of older and younger workers, rather than a negative relationship as crowding out suggests (Banks et al., 2010; Jousten et al., 2010; Munnell & Wu, 2012). From an economic perspective then, there is little to no theoretical or empirical basis for the idea of crowding out.

From a political sociological perspective, the continued political belief in crowding out would suggest there are political incentives for maintaining this idea despite the absence of empirical evidence. Bodies of knowledge become reality through a continual process of social construction and reconstruction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The political construction and reconstruction of primarily unsubstantiated ideas can be crucial for understanding policy processes (Paul & Haddad, 2019), and ideas and discourse have long been recognized as crucial to these processes (Béland, 2005, 2016; Béland & Cox, 2010; Schmidt, 2008). Placing ideas at the heart of empirical analysis – and historical analysis in particular – has allowed for a shift beyond static institutional analyses, accounting for the dynamism of ideas (Schmidt, 2008).

Discursive, ideational approaches are not without critique, however (Campbell, 2002). Many discursive studies are quite focused on describing ideas (the *what*) rather than the mechanisms behind them (the *how*) (Campbell, 2002; Kangas, Niemelä, & Varjonen, 2014). Scholars suggest the *how* can be found in how ideas are framed (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Wagner & Gruszczynski, 2016). Political actors construct reality by providing a frame for understanding ideas, whereby frames refer to an interpretation scheme that structures the meaning of reality (Goffman, 1974; Verloo & Lombardo, 2007). Sociologists van Hulst and Yanow (2016, p. 96) distinguish between framing and frames, whereby framing is the interactive process 'of the naming, selecting, and storytelling embedded in specific policy frames'. While they consider this dynamic process in relation to dealing with sticky policy situations, it is also possible to apply this conceptualisation of framing to the historical development of frames, to understand their dynamic development in a process of framing and reframing across time. From a political or policy perspective, framing 'transforms fragmentary or incidental information into a structured and meaningful problem, in which a solution is implicitly or explicitly included' (Verloo & Lombardo, 2007, p. 33). Political framing can be seen as the first step in the process of framing, followed by media framing and the influence of these frames on public opinion (e.g. Matthes, 2012).

Within the social sciences, there is considerable debate about the terms and methodologies used to analyse political framing. Bacchi, for example, has written extensively on the differences between framing, problematization, and the WPR method (*What's the Problem Represented to Be*) (Bacchi, 2012, 2018). Relying on framing is generally seen as interpretivist, in this case viewing political parties as agentic actors who problematise the issue of age-related crowding out. This use of framing differs from seeing the problematization of crowding out as a product of the political process, situated within a broader, socially produced body of knowledge.

When politicians use frames to convey a message about age-related crowding out, they both construct age-related crowding out as a problem as well as shape the public's interpretation of this problem. Whether politicians frame something as a 'problem' and how they do this matters because these frames create or limit alternative beliefs, and thus structure competing claims within society (Wagner & Gruszczynski, 2016). Consequently, 'the definition of the alternatives is the choice of conflicts, and the choice of conflicts allocates power' (Schattschneider, as cited in Wagner & Gruszczynski, 2016, p. 6). The political framing

of contentious topics like age-related crowding out can be of greater influence on societal beliefs than less contentious topics, where political consensus exists (Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010).

There is a rich empirical literature in which scientists in communication science and political science, among others, demonstrate the need for understanding political frames from a longitudinal perspective across a wide variety of topics. For example, in a comparison of political and media framing following 9/11, Glazier and Boydston (2012) show how frames that initially align can diverge across time. Helbling (2014) also shows how political actors frame immigration and how justifications for these frames develop across time, highlighting the context-dependent nature of frames. Longitudinal empirical studies demonstrate that temporality is a crucial aspect of the relationship between political frames and public opinion. Across time, the consistent framing of an issue by political parties can lead individuals to believe the topic is important, and to form and/or change an opinion on the topic (Carmines & Wagner, 2006). Drawing on these literatures, we apply an interpretive approach to framing, empirically analysing how politicians frame a particular issue in a process of meaning-making that defines a 'problem' as well as their preferred solution to the 'problem' (cf. Bacchi, 2012, 2015, 2018; Colebatch, Hoppe, & Noordegraaf, 2010). We use the term 'framing' to refer to the way in which political parties frame the issue of age-related crowding out in differing ways across political parties and across time.

## Materials and methods

### Methods

We attempt to describe the dynamic political discourse on the idea of age-related crowding out, and account for the mechanisms behind its continued persistence. We do this by drawing on discursive (ideational) institutionalism, as well as sociological and policy perspectives for studying the framing and reframing of ideas (Campbell, 2002) about a particular idea across time. Given the absence of research on age-related crowding out, we apply these frameworks using the sociological method of exploring through 'thick description' (Yin, 2009), to describe the framing and reframing of age-related crowding out across time. By studying this process within the context of key policy changes and welfare trends in the same period, we are able to explore potential mechanisms behind its existence.



## Data

Data for this study included all political party manifestos from 1977 to 2017. In 1983 and 2002, elections were held within one year of the previous election; political parties maintained the same manifesto for these years. A complete list of political parties, election years, and information on the 256 party manifestos collected for the final sample can be found in Table S1 ([Supplemental Material](#)). Other data, such as media or public debates on crowding out or related themes, were not included for space purposes. Data were coded and analysed using qualitative coding software (Nvivo 12) in a three-stage process, following a chronological and thematic structure to organise the vast quantity of data. In a first stage, all party manifestos were read to mark relevant passages of text that could broadly be related to crowding out. Party manifestos not including any marked passages of text were excluded from further analysis. From the 256 manifestos, 148 contained relevant content (see Table S1). In a second stage, all marked passages of text were coded thematically using inductive and deductive codes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014) to identify potential frames, i.e. passages of text where political parties problematise issues related to the position of older or younger workers. Deductive codes included any references to crowding out, retirement, population ageing, and the labour market position of older or younger workers (including unemployment). Inductive codes included codes such as 'flexibility', 'solidarity', 'schooling' and 'dismissal law' (for the full coding scheme, see Table S2, [Supplemental Material](#)). The third stage involved the iterative process of investigating the codes further to discern patterns, for example, historical patterns or patterns related to parties' position in the political majority (i.e. the governing cabinet) vs. political minority (Neale, 2016). These patterns were then analysed to discern similarities and differences in political frames across time, relating patterns to the literature (e.g. the economic and sociological literature on crowding out, early retirement within welfare states). Information in the manifestos was coded for both discursive content as well as the broader context in which any given theme was discussed.

All data were coded and analysed by the first and second authors and two research assistants. The first and second author discussed the initial operationalisation and application of the codes, and all three authors discussed the codes throughout the third, iterative stage at regular intervals to ensure consistency in our understanding and application of the coding scheme. We present our results thematically, starting with the analysis of how crowding out is framed, before exploring potential explanations for

these findings. Within each theme, historical differences are also presented. All quotes presented here have been translated from Dutch to English by the first author.

## Results

### *The framing and reframing of the idea of crowding out*

Our longitudinal study reveals a complex framing and reframing of the idea of age-related crowding out across time. Two key aspects emerge in our qualitative analysis. First, we find a deeply embedded idea in Dutch political discourse that employment is a zero-sum game between groups of workers who crowd each other out in the labour market. This idea is supported by multiple political parties throughout the years. Second, our analysis reveals three historical trends in the framing and reframing of this idea. Initially during the 1970s and early 1980s, there is substantial political support for the idea that older workers crowd out younger workers, with early retirement policies framed as the solution. By the late 1980s, the idea of age-related crowding out gradually becomes reframed by some parties, with attention shifting to older workers and early retirement slowly being called into question. By the 1990s and later, a small number of parties start to suggest that older workers, previously seen as advantaged workers, are now being crowded out from the labour market, at times explicitly by younger workers.

Starting in 1977, the first election year in which early retirement schemes were on the Dutch welfare state agenda (the idea first appeared in a pamphlet in 1974; Oude Nijhuis, 2019), the idea that workers can and do crowd each other out of the labour market, is evident. The Labour Party (Partij van de Arbeid; PvdA) manifesto demonstrates this belief, suggesting a redistribution of work is needed to address unemployment: 'A redistribution of work can be facilitated for example through part-time work, a shortened workday, through more days off, or by allowing older workers to retire early voluntarily. Clearly that costs money, but the much too high youth unemployment *must* be pushed back' (p10; emphasis in original). In 1977, other political parties (e.g. the Christian Democrats, Democrats66), similarly believe in redistributing work between different groups in the labour market.

In the remaining years analysed, the number of explicit references to age-related crowding out are fewer, but discussions regarding a necessary

redistribution of employment across age groups remain. Smaller as well as larger, more prominent parties, including the Labour Party (PvdA), the Greens (GroenLinks), and Democrats66 (D66) all supported a redistribution of labour throughout the 1980s, for example. Political support for the idea of age-related crowding out is seen in how it is problematised (i.e. too many older workers who don't leave the labour market are a cause of high (youth) unemployment). In the Dutch case, politicians framed the labour market problems of the 1970s and 1980s as a zero-sum game between older and younger workers, when in reality, the problem was a disrupted labour market with strict employment protection of older workers that were expensive as a result of steep age-based wage setting in collective agreements.

The political framing of a disrupted labour market as a problem of age-based crowding out is also evident in the initial framing of how the problem should be resolved. Alongside widespread political support for a redistribution of employment, the party manifestos of the late 1970s and 1980s suggest workers should be allowed to retire early and part-time work should be facilitated to create more jobs and better employment opportunities for groups currently excluded from paid work (youth and women in particular). As noted by the Christen Democratisch Appel (CDA) in 1982, the majority ruling party, 'Certainly for the younger unemployed workers, we must not shy away from daring and possibly unusual new policy measures. [...] This includes lowering the early retirement (VUT) age' (CDA, 1982, p. 8).

Whereas the idea of older workers crowding out younger workers dominated the political discourse during the late 1970s and 1980s, by the late 1980s and early 1990s (D66, 1986), older workers themselves are viewed as being disadvantaged in the labour market. This shift occurred at a time when the minimum youth wage gradually became steeper, making younger workers cheaper than older workers. Yet at that time, there is almost no suggestion that the position of older workers is worsened by the position of younger workers per se. Characteristic of this period of discourse is a more general concern about the position of older workers. Several manifestos discuss the position of older workers, without referring to a specific group that can be held to blame. Examples include discussions related to the perceived need to curb early retirement among older workers. By the late 1980s, within ten years after its introduction, the right to early retirement was already seen to be a burden to the welfare state. Two ruling parties of the majority coalition (Christian Democrats and the Labour Party), as

well as some minority parties (e.g. D66) explicitly mention the need to shift away from early retirement schemes towards flexible retirement options. 'During the early 1980s, early retirement was perceived by older workers as a contribution towards solving the unemployment problem, by making room for younger workers. By now, in a very changed labour market situation, early retirement is perceived to be a self-evident right. As we face population ageing, this right threatens to become a financial millstone' (Partij van de Arbeid, 1989, p. 28). The reframing of early retirement as the problem, rather than the solution, becomes increasingly emphasised in the early 1990s, as illustrated by the party manifesto of ruling majority party D66 in 1994 (p. 11). 'The current early retirement schemes (*VUT-regelingen*) are overshooting their target and thus need to be reduced in design and scope. Once intended as a measure to expand the labour market (older workers created space for younger workers), early retirement itself is now a rapidly growing labour cost, and as a result, new employment is hampered.' Later in the same manifesto, the party suggests: 'In order to increase the labour market participation rate and thus the support base for social security and the state pension, the early retirement scheme will have to gradually be replaced by other schemes, such as part-time early retirement, pre-retirement (i.e. retiring part-time, red.) and flexible retirement between the ages of 63 and 67' (D66, 1994, p. 15). This reframing is echoed in many party manifestos of the time, including those of the ruling majority Christian Democrats (1989), as well as smaller minority parties such as PSP92 (1994).

A further reframing of the problem occurs from the 1990s onwards, as some party manifestos start to relate the perceived crowding out of older workers to the position of younger workers. This idea remained implicit in most of the manifestos, suggesting older workers were too expensive in comparison to 'other' groups, without making explicit who 'other' groups are, as illustrated by this quote: 'Older workers are perceived as expensive, rigid and overly specialised. Older workers are increasingly being confronted with this prejudice in reorganisations and job applications. Older workers are still excluded from work on the basis of being older. A change in the negative image is needed, so that an older employee is once again seen as a fully-fledged employee' (AOV Unie 55+, 1998, p. 9). Like this minority party, a number of other political parties explicitly refer to the crowding out of older workers, but this crowding out is not explicitly linked to the position of younger employees. For example, in 2003 the relatively new populist minority party *Leefbaar Nederland*

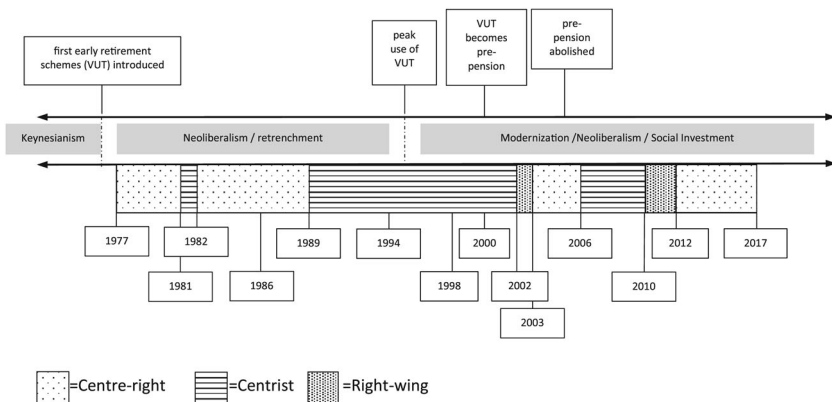
(2003, p. 34) states: 'Older people, although they still have sufficient capacity to work, are not admitted to the labour market.' A few parties, however, like the minority Christian Democratic centrist party ChristenUnie, specifically relate the crowding out of older workers to the position of younger workers: '[...] the labour market is out of whack. There is no balance between labour productivity and employing people according to their ability. Between older workers and the young' (ChristenUnie, 2012, p. 38). The association between older and younger workers is implicit because older workers are more expensive than younger workers, and are thus pushed aside, as majority ruling party VVD states in 2010 (p. 12): 'Many people over 55 are unintentionally sidelined on the labour market. It is difficult for them to find a job, in part because they are supposedly too expensive. To counteract this, there should also be more room to reward work according to added value instead of age.' This view that younger (cheaper) workers crowd out older (expensive) workers is sporadically visible throughout the 2000s, a consequence of steep age-based minimum wage profiles and age-based wage-setting in Dutch collective agreements.

In sum, our analysis shows a historically firmly embedded framing of employment as a zero-sum game in Dutch politics, which fuels the widespread idea of age-related crowding out. But how this idea is framed changes across time in a process of reframing and meaning-making, by multiple political parties, in both majority and minority government positions. Initially framed by multiple majority and minority parties as a problem of older workers taking up much needed jobs for unemployed younger workers (i.e. employment as a zero-sum game with older workers to blame), older workers themselves gradually become the object of political problematization as costly early retirement schemes were retrenched in the 1990s and unemployment among older workers grew. The reframing of early retirement as the problem rather than a solution to the problem of crowding out became supported by majority and minority parties alike. In a further reframing of the issue from the 1990s onwards, a small number of minority parties implicitly and occasionally explicitly suggested older workers were being crowded out by younger workers from the 1990s onwards. But the framing of at least one majority party (VVD) was one of economic reality, namely a labour market disrupted by age-based competition on wages.

Multiple mechanisms are behind this process of framing and reframing in Dutch political discourse, which we now turn to below.

### Explaining the political framing and reframing of crowding out

If we place our analysis of the process of framing and reframing of age-related crowding against the historical and political backdrop of the Dutch welfare state, several mechanisms offer plausible explanations. To clarify these mechanisms, we outlined key historical and political factors in a timeline from 1977-2017 (see Figure 1). First, the framing of the problem (older workers crowding out younger workers) and the solution (early retirement) reflect an institutional mechanism (Thelen & Steinmo, 1992) of varying welfare state principles of justice (e.g. equality, merit and need). Welfare state justice principles are the rules and values through which redistribution (among other things) takes place and thus relate to varying ideas of who deserves what and why (Yerkes & Bal, 2022; Sachweh, 2016; van Oorschot, Roosma, Meuleman, & Reeskens, 2017). The Dutch welfare state, comparatively speaking, is rather unique, with a mix of universalism (e.g. in first-tier pensions), social rights attached to one's status as an employee (e.g. disability insurance, childcare allowances), and since the mid-1990s, an emphasis on individual responsibility and self-sufficiency through a 'managed liberalization' of welfare policies ((e.g. health care) Van der Veen & Trommel, 1999). The expansion of welfare state policies during the Keynesian period happened comparatively late in the Netherlands, during the 1960s (Oude Nijhuis, 2019), with expansion less attributable to favourable economic conditions and class politics as was the case in other welfare states (Pierson, 1996). Rather, expansion occurred as the link between personal



**Figure 1.** Timeline of broader welfare state trends, Dutch election years and coalition political position, 1977–2017. Sources: C. Pierson, 2006; Euwals et al., 2011; Yerkes, 2011; Hemerijck, 2017; Oude Nijhuis, 2019; PDC, 2021.

responsibility and benefit entitlement, characteristic of Christian Democratic class politics in the Netherlands, weakened (Oude Nijhuis, 2019). By the end of the 'golden age' of Keynesian welfare state development and relative late expansion of the Dutch welfare state in the 1970s, the belief that older workers crowd out younger workers was well established. Crowding out was generally constructed as an issue of high unemployment, particularly among young people, who were being kept out of the labour market by older workers.

Placed against this background, the framing of employment redistribution as the solution to crowding out potentially reflects an underlying mechanism of political support for a justice principle based on equality (Sachweh, 2016): Advantaged older workers needed to make way for disadvantaged labour market outsiders (younger workers). This quote from the manifesto of D66, who joined the majority coalition following the 1981 election in which this manifesto was used, illustrates this justice principle: '[...] We strive for a fairer distribution of all available work (both in the formal and informal sectors). This concerns the (equal) distribution of paid and unpaid work and (equal) opportunities for self-development.' This mechanism corresponds with what Oude Nijhuis (2019, p. 296) suggests was an absence of parliamentary attention at the time for 'the consequences of generous welfare outcomes for economic incentives.' In other words, while based on a principle of equality, the development of early retirement schemes created a disincentive to work and higher welfare state costs. At the same time, the development of early retirement framed as a solution to the problem of crowding out can be considered a logical policy turn within a Keynesian welfare state paradigm (Hemerijck, 2012). Within the Dutch Keynesian context, early retirement was a more attractive policy option than the exit of older workers through unemployment and occupational disability schemes, which until the 1980s were a well-used shortcut for employers looking to get rid of unwanted older workers (Oude Nijhuis, 2019; Van Oorschot, 2000). From this perspective, framing the Dutch labour market as a zero-sum game between older and younger workers was potentially politically more attractive, benefitting labour market insiders and thus reflective of welfare state politics of the time (Pierson, 1994).

The reframing of crowding out in the years that followed can be seen as driven by different mechanisms. By the late 1980s already, crowding out first became reframed as the labour market situation of older workers now being the problem – early retirement schemes were now seen as too expensive. Generous Keynesian policies made way for

concerns about the political and financial legitimacy of the welfare state, including concern about the newly developed early retirement schemes. A reframing of early retirement as needing to be cut back and reformed is logical from this perspective.

Driving this first reframing is a combination of institutional and political mechanisms, reflecting political decision-making in the Dutch institutional welfare state and labour market context of the time. Politically, the reframing of early retirement schemes as the problem rather than the solution shows a jostling of political interests within the Dutch welfare state as the Keynesian paradigm made way for neoliberal reform and retrenchment (Pierson, 2006; Pierson, 1994). Serious political debates arose by the late 1980s around the now deeply entrenched right of older workers to retire early, as highlighted by shifting frames of alternatively protecting older workers and needing to retrench costly welfare state arrangements. For example, in 1989, the Christian Democratic party CDA, leader of the majority coalition leading up to the 1989 election stated: 'Early retirement systems will gradually have to give way to forms of flexible retirement.' The Labour Party, who became a majority coalition party only after the election, stated in their 1989 (p14) manifesto that they intended to keep early retirement *in addition to* flexible retirement, rather than *instead of*: 'In addition to reduced weekly working hours [...] part-time work, 5-shift work, early retirement as well as other forms of flexible retirement and other forms of redistribution should be promoted.' These quotes illustrate divisions between political parties, although the Labour Party shifted its frame just prior to the elections nine years later, as highlighted by their 1998 (p.28) manifesto discussed above, in which they argue that the entitlement to early retirement is becoming a financial millstone. Other, smaller parties contested this new framing, protecting the position of older workers, as exemplified by the manifesto of minority party SAP (1994, p.15): 'The SAP believes: It is a right - [...] not an obligation - to reduce work by working shorter hours: work four days a week four years before retirement, three days per week three years before, and so on. At the same time, full accrual of pension. Hands off the VUT and other early retirement schemes.'

This political mechanism cannot be seen separately from a broader institutional mechanism related to the context of the Dutch welfare state and labour market. The rather unique Dutch response to neoliberal welfare state trends elsewhere was to focus on far-reaching labour market flexibilization (e.g. Visser & Hemerijck, 1997) and to reform the welfare state in a direction of managed liberalism (Van der Veen & Trommel,



1999). At the time, the Dutch labour market was also characterised by an increase in the steepness of youth minimum wage profiles without a corresponding change to adult minimum wage profiles. The result was a growing wage differential between older and younger workers. As wages generally increase with age, it becomes financially attractive for employers to hire younger workers.

Consequently, as the financial viability of the Dutch welfare state came under increasing pressure, age-related crowding out became reframed again from the mid-1990s onwards by some parties as a problem of older workers being crowded out. In most cases, political parties felt the distorted labour market led employers to be less inclined to hire older workers. The political solution was to reframe age-related crowding out as a problem requiring flexible solutions and investment in older workers. Multiple parties, such as the Labour Party, the SAP, GroenLinks and D66 campaigned for flexible options such as part-time retirement and/or flexible forms of early retirement from the late 1980s onwards. For example, minority party D66 states in 1989 (p.41): ‘D66 believes that flexible retirement should be vigorously pursued so that the transition from working to not working is more gradual. This will also ensure that successors can benefit from the work experience that older workers have gained.’ The call for flexible solutions became stronger across time. Majority party VVD states, in 2010 (p.12): ‘In line with liberal principles, the VVD believes that there should be much more flexibility in our society, so that older people can decide for themselves in what way they will participate in the workforce.’

Looking closely at the manifestos, we also see a growing emphasis on the added value of older employees, as noted in the D66 manifesto, and the need for employment for workers of all ages. Institutionally, the emphasis on employment fits the broader turn towards activation and social investment in European countries in the mid-to-late 1990s (Esping-Andersen, 2000; Hemerijck, 2017). Politically, the shift in welfare protection and an emphasis on activating workers of all ages also aligned with the shifts between and within political parties at the time. During the 1990s, the Christian Democratic party CDA lost its dominant political position, and political partisanship shifted towards more conservative factions within the party (Oude Nijhuis, 2019). When the CDA returned to the political majority in 2002, the link between individual effort and obligations tied to welfare support had become strengthened as ‘left-leaning voices were effectively sidelined’ within the party (Oude Nijhuis, 2019, p. 238).

Integrating these arguments, we suggest the political framing and reframing age-related crowding out is due to an interplay of institutional and political mechanisms. From this perspective, it becomes possible to understand the historical development of Dutch political discourse around crowding out.

## Conclusion

The pressures placed on European societies and welfare states as a result of population aging are multiple. A presumed consequence of these pressures is the challenge to intergenerational solidarity and a generational conflict over the distribution of resources. The distribution of employment is a key example. As European countries increase retirement ages to maintain the financial viability of welfare states, belief in the historical 'lump-of-labour' fallacy (i.e. that employment is a zero-sum game between different groups) has the potential to come back to the fore. In this in-depth historical analysis, we show how the political belief in age-related crowding out persists across time in the Netherlands, in a process of framing and reframing against a backdrop of political and welfare state development.

Our qualitative analysis focused on a description of the framing and reframing of crowding out across time, as well as an exploration of mechanisms behind this process. This analysis suggests there is a clear political belief in age-related crowding out throughout political discourse of the last forty years, although there was a brief period in the 1980s and 1990s when the discourse was less focused on this issue. While often framed as an issue between older and younger generations of workers, political frames at times remained implicit, framing the issue as the position of one particular group (e.g. older workers) as better or worse compared to a non-descript 'other' group without making explicit who the 'other' groups are. Moreover, our longitudinal analysis suggests the framing and reframing of this idea is characterised by three periods. Initially, older workers were perceived to crowd out younger workers, a frame demonstrated by multiple political parties. In a first reframing of the issue, by the late 1980s, early retirement and the early exit of older workers became framed as the problem. A second reframing took place by the mid-1990s and later, as a small number of parties suggested older workers were now being crowded out of the labour market, at times explicitly by younger workers. We explain this firmly embedded belief in age-related crowding out and its framing and reframing across time through a combination of

institutional and political mechanisms. These mechanisms show an underlying welfare state principle of equality in times of welfare state expansion and generosity, making way for welfare state retrenchment and new ways of constructing the policy problem. Crucial to these developments are the institutional make-up of the Dutch welfare state and labour market, with its focus on flexibilization and steep age-based wage profiles. While research on the political belief in age-related crowding out is scarce, these developments would appear to be in line with general welfare state developments in the Netherlands and beyond (Yerkes, 2011; Hemerijck, 2017; Oude Nijhuis, 2019; Pierson, 1994; Visser & Hemerijck, 1997).

Our findings are shaped by a number of limitations. They are based on a document analysis of political party manifestos. While the dataset is rich and historically detailed, we cannot exclude the possibility that an analysis of other documents, such as media or parliamentary debates, would nuance our conclusions. Research using these documents or other data sources, such as in-depth interviews, would provide potentially useful findings on actors and their specific interests within the political and institutional configurations studied here. The analysis focuses on the presence of political frames, problematising the issue of age-related crowding out. Further analysis identifying points when crowding out frames do or do not work or are not used by political parties could also be informative. Additionally, the findings outlined here are context driven and cannot be generalised to other countries. Crucial cross-country and regional differences exist in employment opportunities, labour market policies and social policies of welfare states (e.g. Pierson & Castles, 2006), which shape the labour market position of both older and younger workers (e.g. Fagan et al., 2012). Such policies shape the possible comparative advantage of younger workers over older workers. They also give shape to the institutional tools at hand that politicians are likely to use in their framing of solutions to policy problems. Further comparative research on the political belief in age-related crowding out could provide key insights into how this idea is framed in differing welfare state contexts.

Even with these limitations, our analysis provides key insights into the framing and reframing of political ideas across time. It provides, to the best of our knowledge, the first empirical evidence on the continued political belief in age-related crowding out, a phenomenon known theoretically and empirically not to exist. It describes how political parties frame and reframe an unsubstantiated idea, which offers important information

about the politics of policymaking (Paul & Haddad, 2019) and potentially useful information for investigating the relationship between political framing and media framing or public opinion. Future studies, for example through the use of in-depth interviews or other documents, could explore how the framing of this discourse is strategically used within policy processes, for example around pensions and retirement, or how media framing adopts or diverges from these political frames.

Key issues remain. While our analysis suggests younger workers may be perceived to have comparative advantages over older workers, they certainly face multiple labour market difficulties given their employment in temporary and flexible work forms (Fagan et al., 2012). At the same time, older workers are increasingly expected to work longer and retire later, yet significant age-related discrimination exists, both in perceived age-related discrimination (Andriessen, Fernee, & Wittebrood, 2014) as well as in recruitment and selection procedures (Mann, Beukeboom, & Fokkens, 2017). International organisations such as the OECD have similarly concluded that the Dutch labour market is not favourable to workers over the age of 50 (OECD, 2014a). Future research on how the framing of age-related crowding out is used strategically in the policy-making process might counter these developments.

## Notes

1. This is only the case for workers with defined contribution schemes, which holds for 10% of all Dutch workers.
2. The minimum wage for workers aged 15-22 starts at 2.80 Euro/hour for 15-year-olds (based on a 40-hour workweek) and increasing annually), which differs significantly from the adult minimum wage (9.33 Euro). This stepwise youth minimum wage was introduced in 1974. The age-profile was based on the actual wage difference between age groups. The steepness of the age-profile was increased in 1981 and again in 1983 with the aim of lowering the minimum wages of the younger age groups in order to stimulate youth employment.

## Disclosure statement

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