

**SUBVERSIVE POLARIZATION: HOW
POWER AND PROFIT DRIVE
DIVISION**

WHO DIS 



Justice for Prosperity

Executive summary

Across Europe, and increasingly in the Netherlands, a new political strategy is emerging. Extremist forces are using social media platforms to foment and exacerbate our polarized climate. There is an active agenda to exploit social unrest and weaponize fear with an endgame of destabilizing democracies. Behind the scenes, what appears to be a disparate group of individuals from politics, social media and religious organizations is actually a coordinated network of actors who are reframing social progress as evidence of moral decline.

WhoDis II, the second phase of the Justice for Prosperity (JfP) initiative, was launched to understand this phenomenon more deeply, and to ask the questions: Who are the actors driving divisive narratives? What motivates them? And how do their messages spread and take hold? JfP's research was designed to help pinpoint who is donating to these movements and who is controlling their narratives. Our goal is to inform funders, policymakers, and civil-society partners who seek to strengthen democratic resilience and counter polarization before it undermines democracy as we know it.

Our Theory of Change

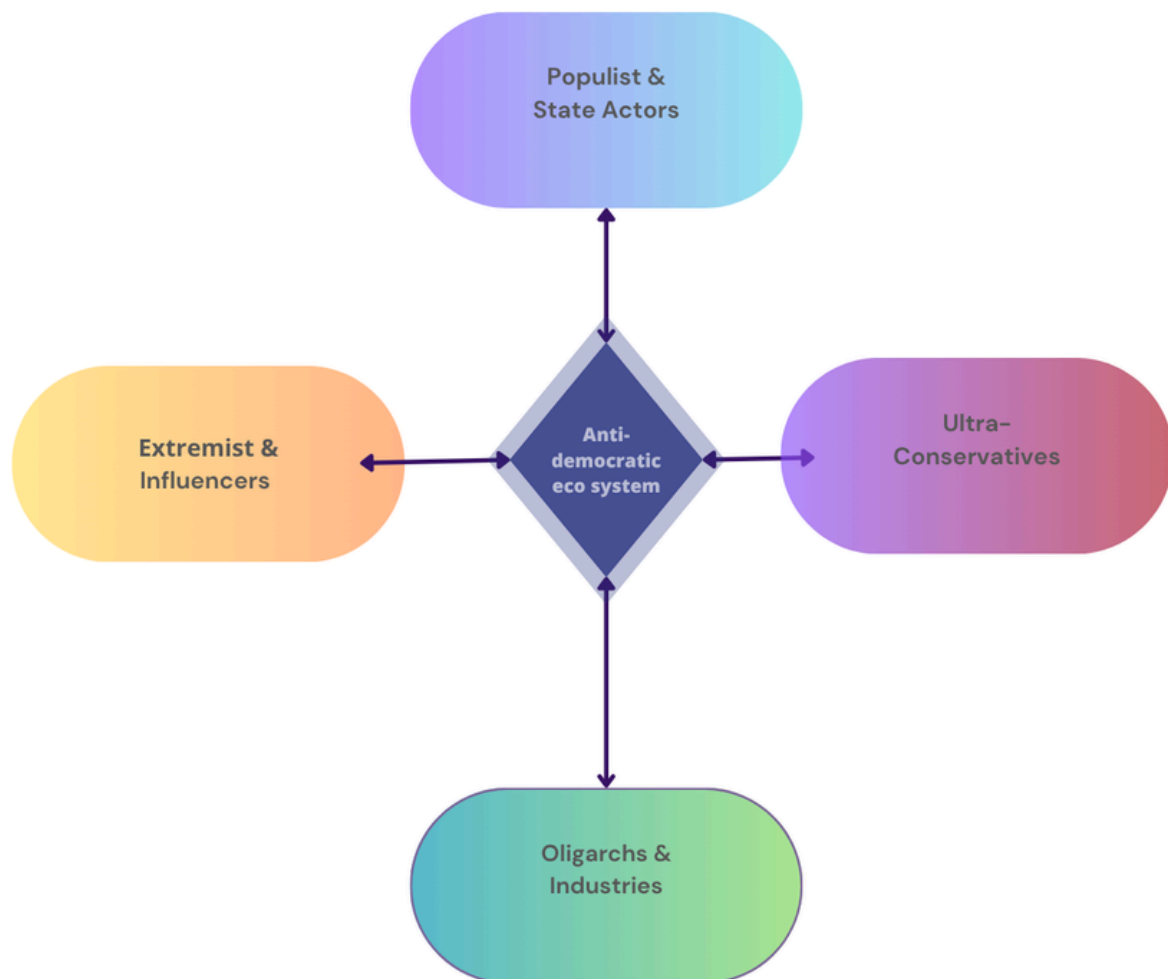
Our work is based on the premise that effective response requires first understanding the ecosystem that sustains division. Using the Anti-Rights Diamond Model developed by JfP, this research maps how four interdependent sides work in concert to achieve a much greater and more nefarious agenda. Each corner of the diamond plays a role in converting ideology into influence: populist parties turn grievances into political capital; media influencers and street movements amplify outrage; religious and traditionalist groups supply the moral language; and financial or industrial actors provide the resources to lobby for and sustain campaigns. Together, these networks manufacture a doom-mongering vision of a civilization in crisis: portraying movements for the expansion of rights and freedoms, particularly for vulnerable communities, as dangers to Dutch identity and stability. But their true, shared motivation is the consolidation of power through fear, nostalgia, and social fragmentation.

This ecosystem runs on a simple strategy: Politicians first preach fear and crisis. Extremists, influencers, and aligned media then make that fear tangible, both online and offline, by sharing disinformation, concrete stories, images, and brutal incidents. Their messaging drives toxic polarization, pitting the in-group against the out-group. People on either side shift into defensive and offensive mode in a quest to protect their families, home, sense of security. As an absolutist mentality of "you're either with me or against me" arises, the middle ground disappears.

From there, the spiral turns one way. The hunger for a strong leader grows, giving license to political leaders to seize more power in order to "to lead the nation through distress." From there the system slides toward autocratic control. Oligarchs then put pressure on these leaders (the Elon Musk-Trump relationship is a prime example) to convert money, data, legal tools, and deregulation into durable power and profits.

The Methodology

To expose how these narratives are built and spread, WhoDis II combined data-driven digital analysis with qualitative mapping of actors and narratives. Our purpose was not to simply study the spread of disinformation, but to reconstruct its proliferation. We wanted to find the fire-starters and unveil their identities and interests. Our researchers scraped and analyzed Dutch-language content across major social-media platforms, classifying posts by issue and narrative framing. Controlled algorithmic accounts traced how users are steered toward increasingly extreme content, while the anti-rights diamond model illuminated the coordination among political figures, influencers, faith-based organizations, and funders. The result is a high-resolution picture of the ecosystem of amplification through which divisive narratives move from fringe to mainstream. Our study documented a pattern that had previously been hypothesized by anecdotal evidence: political statements based on real world events lead directly to spikes of divisive rhetoric on social media. JfP's early-warning system can now offer a clear analysis of how anti-rights networks in the Netherlands transform online outrage into real-world influence and, most importantly, where the opportunities are to interrupt that cycle.



The Actors

Social anxieties about immigration, crime, gender, and sexuality fuel the election campaigns of populist leaders like Geert Wilders and Thierry Baudet. Their speeches and platforms transform their self-manufactured cultural fears into policy proposals that reverberate in the chambers of parliament. Alternative media outlets like Ongehoord Nederland, De Dagelijkse Standaard, and De Andere Krant take up the task of spreading and sensationalizing these politicians' claims, while influencers such as Eva Vlaardingebroek amplify them across social media and into international circuits. Faith-based organizations like Civitas Christiana and Schreeuw om Leven provide the moral and religious language that frames abortion, LGBTIQ+ rights, and sex education as existential threats to family and religious values. They supply the petitions, the marches, and the theology that give the movement its shield of moral superiority. They are complemented by groups like Defend Netherlands, Pegida Nederland and White Lives Matter NL, who stage confrontational spectacles in the streets that force these debates into the public square. Behind it all, a shadow layer of donors, lobbies, and firms ensure that these operatives have the resources to proliferate.

What Motivates Them?

For populist politicians, visibility turns into popularity, and popularity brings in the votes that allow them to realize their ultimate goal of gaining power. They get the most traction by fearmongering about immigrants and outrage about crime. Media entrepreneurs and influencers churn indignation into profit, pushing clickbait that will draw in financial contributions. Religious organizations often fabricate moral panic and hysteria about attacks on "traditional family values" to garner donations and gain cultural influence. Even when funders and lobbyists don't genuinely believe in these ideologies, they strategically recognize that aligning with religious beliefs that support their political interests often spells success. Every group in each of the four corners of the diamond reap the benefits of shared anxieties about crises in housing, food supplies and culture. These very real social problems are scapegoating by demonizing vulnerable populations, like immigrants or gender non-conforming people. Their shared sense of existential threat is a powerful force that binds them together and transcends their differences.

And, of course, financial kickbacks are a prime motivator. Every one of these actors profit from disinformation and polarization in multiple ways. Politicians reap campaign contributions from tech titans and oligarchs who seek to multiply their fortunes through deregulation and loopholes that help them evade policies like the European Union's Digital Security Act. Influencers can achieve significant financial gains through social media monetization. For instance, platforms like Twitter/X, which reward conservative and right-leaning content, may encourage users to spread misinformation or make polarizing statements to gain virality and, consequently, receive payment for their content.

This trend is evident on other platforms as well, where polarizing or shocking content often garners higher engagement rates, thereby increasing reach and popularity, which can lead to financial rewards from the platform. Religious leaders enjoy unprecedented donations of money, gifts, new buildings, and renovation projects in exchange for giving moral cover to the nefarious agendas of politicians and titans of industry.

What is their Ecosystem of Amplification?

What makes this movement dangerous is not just the fervor and strategic power of its actors, but the way their messages get multiplied and amplified through an interconnected ecosystem. Politicians formalize and legislate them; media and influencers spread them; religious organizations provide the moral certitude; and street movements dramatize them. Each step feeds into the next. Dutch influencers appear on foreign platforms, presenting their country as a frontline in a global culture war, and bring that validation home to bolster their domestic arguments. A march against abortion becomes a headline in a sympathetic outlet, which is echoed by a politician in parliament, which in turn inspires further mobilization. A Quran desecration staged by Pegida sparks outrage, which is amplified online, covered by broadcasters, and then referenced by leaders as proof of unrest. Money; whether from wealthy individuals, consultancies, or lobbying groups, it ensures that this machinery does not burn out.

In this ecosystem, ideas that previously would have been considered fringe are infused them into the mainstream. Theories that might once have been dismissed as extremist find their way into parliamentary debate, school curricula disputes, and public policy proposals. The narratives converge on a simple message: that Dutch society is under siege and only drastic action can save it. This is why immigration is framed as demographic warfare; why LGBTIQ+ rights are described as indoctrination; why crime is depicted as evidence of systemic collapse. Each of these threads bolsters the next, weaving a story of existential crisis that demands immediate, uncompromising response. The hunger for a strong leader emerges, and an autocrat suddenly becomes shockingly popular.

Drilling Down on Social Media Platforms

A keen observer of the current milieu understands that there is a deep entanglement between online discourse and offline political life across major social media platforms. Across all platforms online conversations get deeply intertwined with real-world events, and social media algorithms reward the resulting momentum, visibility, and outrage. What sets WhoDis II apart is its capability to go beyond mere observations and accurately identify the individuals who spark the unrest and furor. JfP's researchers tracked activity on three of the most popular social media platforms and discovered notable differences across these platforms. Their findings reveal that where there is smoke, there is indeed a fire-starter.

Twitter/X:

Musk's introduction of the AI chatbot Grok, was intentionally programmed to be "anti-woke," reinforces this ideological framing. This design may be encouraging not only more right-leaning discourse, but also a general tolerance for conspiracy theories and provocative commentary.

JfP's data reflects this skew:

- Right-wing hashtags (113) far outnumber those associated with left-wing discourse (60), suggesting both algorithmic and user-base preference toward conservative and even far-right narratives.
- These dynamics position Twitter as an outlier among major social platforms, with an environment where right-wing content circulates more easily and gains greater visibility.

Instagram:

JfP's data tells a somewhat different story:

The most active hashtag in the dataset, #stopfossielesubsidies, was driven by environmental activist groups such as Extinction Rebellion NL and Milieudefensie, highlighting a strong user and algorithmic interest in climate activism.

- The surge in September 2023 posts corresponded with the A12 blockades, an event that dominated national attention both online and offline.
- Offline actions generate digital traction, and online amplification reinforces public engagement and, at times, intensifies polarization.
- Left-wing hashtags and influencers also experience sharp upticks around key events, suggesting that Instagram's architecture rewards moments of real-world visibility and protest.

TikTok:

Top comments under political hashtags provides a glimpse into user sentiment:

- Under #asielstop, the majority of comments echo the slogan "Stem PVV" and reference the upcoming October 2025 Dutch elections, signaling clear alignment with right-wing populist messaging.
- The same tone appears under #grenscontroles, where comments express approval and support, "Diep respect," "Top," and "Goed", often paired with references to the "overheid" (government) and approving emojis.
- TikTok, like other platforms, serves as a powerful space for reinforcing partisan narratives and translating offline political movements into viral, emotive, and easily shareable online expressions.

The convergence of bad actors, strategic manipulation, and a coordinated amplification ecosystem has transformed fringe agendas into mainstream political discourse in the Netherlands. By weaving together populist opportunism, media spectacle, religious conviction, and financial support, these actors manufacture a sense of a crisis of civilization that corrodes democratic institutions and human rights.

By understanding who the aggressors are, what drives them, and how they coordinate, it becomes possible to confront the threat not piecemeal, but systemically. The fight is not just against individual actors or isolated incidents but against a whole architecture of strategy, organization, and amplification that thrives on division and destabilization. With an early warning system like Who Dis II, JfP gets beyond the symptoms of polarization and disinformation and unveils their source. The result gives stakeholders, whether from civil society, government, media, or academia, the tools they need to be on the offensive in the urgent work of in the protecting and stabilizing democracy.



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