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Urban political overrepresentation and access to public funding for municipalities in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Advantageous positions for politically overrepresented groups and rural political discontent are widely debated in academia. However, the role urban political overrepresentation may have in benefiting urban citizens and as an explanation for rural political discontent has hitherto received little attention. This paper addresses urban overrepresentation within national politics and suggests how this, in turn, engenders favorable policies for extremely urbanized municipalities. The paper refers to the Dutch context to illustrate how urban political overrepresentation operates, the access that municipalities with different degrees of urbanization have to public funding, and how they profit from the region deals between 2017 and 2020. The most urbanized municipalities in the Netherlands are found to be politically overrepresented at the national level and have relatively good access to public funding. This is likely to produce benefits for these municipalities and their inhabitants. This paper discusses how these benefits may be an explanation for political discontent in other municipalities.

1. Introduction

In March 2023, the Farmer Citizen Movement (BBB) won the provincial elections in the Netherlands. This party, founded in 2019 to represent the countryside, was successful throughout the country and received its highest vote share in 'not urbanized' municipalities. The BBB victory was explained as an expression of rural discontent with environmental policies and with the decline of public services (Bounds, 2023). Interestingly, between 2017 and 2021, the Dutch government acknowledged a long-term need for more attention to regions outside the main cities, and it developed a policy program to support such regions, known as the 'region deals' (Tweede Kamer, 2020). The BBB victory showed that these efforts were insufficient to prevent rural electorates from abandoning government parties.

Scholars have given increased attention to populist parties in rural regions and to discontent in 'left-behind' places and the 'places that don't matter' (Cramer, 2016; Mitsch, Lee, & Morrow, 2021; Munis, 2020; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). A body of literature broadly focused on what we can call 'the geography of discontent' examines both the causes and effects of resentment in rural and post-industrial regions. It extends Soja's (2013) argument for spatial justice, which posits that spatial inequalities should be fully considered when creating a socially just society. Literature on place-based and rural resentment suggests that

people in rural regions feel ignored by political elites (Cramer, 2016; Munis, 2020). Some scholars have challenged the idea of 'left-behind' rural populations as fuelling the turn to right-wing populism; scholars in the US, for instance, have shown that supporters of Donald Trump are not particularly poor or disadvantaged relative to urban populations; moreover, far from being political neglected, rural areas are highly overrepresented in Congress (Gaynor & Gimpel, 2021). But others have continued to give credence to the idea of rural neglect and discontent (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Massetti and Schakel (2015), for instance, argue that national governments favor economic development in rich regions without providing poor regions with sufficient funding to close the development gap. Subsequently, they compare the internal economic differences in a country to imperial differences between a metropolitan state and its colonies (Massetti & Schakel, 2015).

Dumont (2019) looks at the issue from a different angle, focusing not on the neglect of rural places but on the government's disproportionate investment in cities. From this perspective, urban regions' economic success may be based, in part, on their political overrepresentation and the power they wield. If politicians disproportionately live in heavily urbanized municipalities, these municipalities may benefit from extra attention and potentially better access to public funding compared to smaller municipalities (Ansolabehere, Gerber, & Snyder, 2002; Fiva & Halse, 2016). More public funding likely means better services and

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opportunities for the inhabitants of more urbanized municipalities (Rodríguez-Pose & Garcilazo, 2015). Benefits could also come through more political attention, power, and networking advantages.

This paper examines unequal political representation across different regions in the tradition of earlier research (Latner & McGann, 2005; Thomassen & Andeweg, 2004), giving attention to political mechanisms that allow material advantages to accrue disproportionately to urbanized areas. The Netherlands is a useful case to examine the existence of urban political overrepresentation and consequent benefits. The country has a proportional representation [PR] electoral system, in which political parties have candidate lists in one national district. Within such an electoral system, politicians from all backgrounds, theoretically at least, have an equal opportunity to enter parliament (Latner & McGann, 2005). The PR system in the Netherlands differs significantly from the British single-member plurality (SMP) electoral system, in which all elected members of parliament represent a specific district.

The national legislature in the Netherlands may favor extremely urbanized municipalities over other municipalities (In the context of the Netherlands, 'extremely urbanized municipalities' are those with 2500 addresses or more per km²; fewer than 10 percent of the municipalities in the Netherlands fall into this category; Statistics Netherlands, 2020a, 2020b). The disparity in the level of police deployment serves as an example. Despite the increased shift in criminal activities from cities towards the countryside, the 2013 police reform in the Netherlands led to increased police deployment in more urbanized municipalities and a decrease in other municipalities. Provincial governors collectively critiqued this policy and described the 'police-less countryside,' as a 'paradise for criminals' (Wiegant, 2017, p. 5). Different municipalities in the Netherlands may have unequal access to power and public funding (Van der Meulen, 2021), and research has already pointed to the higher lobbying power of more urbanized regions compared to rural regions (Meijers & Van der Wouw, 2019).

This paper investigates how the most urbanized municipalities in the Netherlands benefit from political overrepresentation. The paper explains how political overrepresentation may produce political benefits for overrepresented municipalities. First, the paper analyses the extent to which politicians who live in extremely urbanized municipalities are overrepresented in the national legislature. Second, it investigates how this overrepresentation yields political benefits by comparing differences in access to government funding between extremely urbanized and other municipalities. I am specifically interested in the money received by municipalities in the Netherlands from the 'region deals' and the public funding opportunities included in this program. After explaining the consequences of spatially concentrated political benefits, I present an agenda to further investigate the role of political overrepresentation and its relation to economic development and rural political discontent.

2. Theoretical perspectives on the effects of political overrepresentation

Across the social sciences, evidence supports the notion that political overrepresentation yields material benefits for the overrepresented group. If a disproportionate number of politicians share your social background, the government is more likely to understand and pay attention to your problems and to empathize with your needs and desires (Bovens & Wille, 2017). The social backgrounds of politicians 'matter for their views and actions in the political system, above and beyond the party platforms on which they were elected' (Schakel & Van der Pas, 2020, p. 421). Therefore, political overrepresentation helps advance the interests of the overrepresented group by introducing policies that benefit them (Bovens & Wille, 2017). Thomassen and Andeweg (2004) show that many parliamentarians in the Netherlands not only claim to represent the interests of their party or individual voters, but also to represent the interests of the region where they come from and people of the same gender, ethnicity, and profession as themselves.

Consequently, politically overrepresented groups are more likely to benefit disproportionately from governmental policy decisions (Espírito-Santo, Freire, & Serra-Silva, 2020; Pande, 2003), while underrepresented groups are more likely to feel excluded and disengage from politics (Bird, Saalfeld, & Wüst, 2010; Gilardi, 2015).

Political overrepresentation and its concomitant policy effects may also be relevant with respect to places along the urban/rural continuum. The overrepresentation of municipalities characterized by a specific degree of urbanization within the national political arena is likely to benefit the inhabitants of these municipalities. Similarly, the interests of citizens from underrepresented municipalities are likely to be less understood and acted upon, hindering their social and economic development.

Research on the geographical effects of political overrepresentation on public spending demonstrates that politicians favor their region and place of residence. Ansolabehere et al. (2002) illustrate that overrepresented counties in American states tend to receive disproportionate funding. Knight (2008) shows how states with relatively small populations receive more funding in the Senate, where they are overrepresented, than in the House of Representatives, where they are not. Fiva and Halse (2016) apply this to the regional context and show that regional governments in Norway spend more money in towns where many members of the coalition parties live. Harjunen, Saarimaa, and Tukiainen (2021) focus on a local context and show that in amalgamating Finnish municipalities, more public jobs will concentrate in the politically overrepresented parts of the municipality. These authors show that politicians, as might be expected, tend to favor the places they represent. This paper considers whether this process extends even further—that is, whether politicians are generally inclined to favor not only their own places of residence, but also the types of municipalities where they live.

2.1. Political benefits for urban municipalities and the geography of discontent

French scholars who study the geography of discontent argue that power is concentrated in more urbanized municipalities and that this, in turn, supports their economic development (Dumont, 2019; Guilluy, 2019). Dumont (2019) argues that French urban regions partly rely on political benefits to create growth, explaining that public investments are the most crucial reason urban regions outperform rural regions economically. Despite their clear contribution to urban economic growth, these public investments are not explicitly accounted for when analyzing the economic success of urban regions. Instead of being considered an economic stimulus by the government, the effects of the investments are attributed to the inherent economic qualities of urban places (Dumont, 2019).

There is also emergent academic attention to rural political discontent generated by spatial inequality in France. Guilluy (2016) explains how gentrification forces the lower middle classes out of the cities, concentrating power among the old upper class and the upper middle class (Guilluy, 2019). While these elites experience problems in urban France in their daily life, they are less aware of the problems in peripheral France. In this respect, poor people in more urbanized municipalities can be said to be better off than those municipalities outside of major urban cores. They have the political benefit that their problems are at least likelier to be noted by the elites. Guilluy (2016) rightfully foresaw the yellow vest protests as rural revolts against the urban-based elites. Likewise, the support for Trump and Brexit in rural and post-industrial regions is often understood as an attempt by voters from 'left-behind' regions to make themselves heard (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Cramer (2016), for instance, describes how rural inhabitants of the US state of Wisconsin experience a lack of attention from urban political elites. Munis (2020) likewise shows that in the United States, rural citizens have relatively higher levels of place-based resentment and are more critical of the national politicians who govern them. McKay,

Jennings, and Stoker (2021) add that rural citizens feel socially deprived. These insights call for greater attention to how feelings of rural resentment and processes of political under- and overrepresentation emerge across a variety of political systems and contexts.

2.2. The electoral system and municipal financing in the Netherlands

It is well-established that political overrepresentation creates benefits for overrepresented groups, but it is essential to understand the different ways electoral systems produce the overrepresentation of specific groups. In the case of this paper, overrepresentation applies to specific *types* of municipalities, whose inhabitants together form a group with a shared geographic background. In the Netherlands, there is a single national electoral district, and each vote is weighted equally within the PR electoral. The Dutch parliament has 150 seats, which means that all parties that reach at least 1/150 of the valid votes are elected to parliament. The number of seats each party wins almost perfectly reflects its vote share. Even small parties will have MPs elected (Gallagher, Lever, & Mair, 2011). The MPs selected to serve in parliament come from candidate lists produced by each party; these candidates do not represent specific geographical constituencies. The party leader tops the list, and a committee within the party decides on the order of remaining candidates on the list.

In most parties, members can influence this process (Gallagher et al., 2011). Parties may try to create balanced candidate lists, weighing multiple factors such as the candidates' field of expertise, gender, age, ethnicity, as well as region (Andeweg, 2005, p. 501). While regional identities may factor into a candidate's position on the party list, a candidate's position on the party list does not hinge on gaining support from voters in a specific area. Only preference votes can alter the list order. With preference votes, a candidate obtains 25 percent of the electoral threshold of 0.67 percent to be directly elected. Usually, only a few politicians get elected through this mechanism, and sometimes the preference votes they receive are based on their regional support (Nagtzaam & Louwerse, 2023). Most votes usually go to the party leader, which is a significant difference from systems that elect politicians within geographical constituencies (Latner & McGann, 2005).

To understand the dynamics of geographical over- and underrepresentation in the Netherlands, we also need to consider mechanisms of public investment in urban and rural municipalities. Heinelt and Hlepas (2006) describe three European systems of local government. According to their typology, Southern European municipalities belong to the *Franco* group (named after its Napoleonic roots). These tend to be relatively small and have low political and financial autonomy. Municipalities in Ireland and the United Kingdom belong to the *Anglo* group. They have a weak legal and political status but relatively high public service responsibilities (Heinelt & Hlepas, 2006). Finally, there is the *North and Middle European* group, to which municipalities in the Netherlands belong. They have a relatively high level of political and fiscal autonomy. *Subsidiarity* is the guiding principle. This is the idea that governmental responsibility should be concentrated within the lowest possible level of government (Hesse & Sharpe, 1991). Kersting and Vetter (2013) confirm this division between European regions but also observe one key difference in the fiscal autonomy of municipalities: High local political autonomy often coincides with high local fiscal autonomy. However, in both the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, the fiscal autonomy of local governments (i.e. municipalities in the context of the Netherlands) is relatively low (Kersting & Vetter, 2013).

Municipalities with high political and low fiscal autonomy require specific funding instruments from the national government. The small amount of taxes they can impose is insufficient to cover their vast number of political tasks (Kersting & Vetter, 2013). The national funding for municipalities in the Netherlands falls into three categories. First, there is non-earmarked funding for municipal tasks, which gives municipalities some freedom over spending (Korthals Altes, 2002; OECD, 2020). Second, there is earmarked funding for specific tasks.

Municipalities should spend this money on prescribed aims set by the national government (OECD, 2020). Third, there are matching grants. This is earmarked or non-earmarked funding from the national government, which is then 'matched' with an equal or greater amount of funding from the subnational government. Matching grants have become popular in the United Kingdom, leading to 'deals' between the national and local governments over where to spend public money (O'Brien & Pike, 2015). The Netherlands also increasingly uses a matching grant system and 'deals' with municipalities (Agenda Stad, 2020a; Rijksoverheid, 2020a). Critiques of this approach question the transparency of public funding for municipalities. Decision-making around the allocation of matching grant funds to municipalities is not entirely transparent (Bruinberg, 2018). Nonetheless, the deals reveal that different kinds of municipalities have varying degrees of access to national government funds through matching grants.

2.3. Conceptual model

The remainder of this article considers the interaction between the parliamentary electoral system and the municipal financing system in the Netherlands. The question is whether particular kinds of geographies (on a rural-urban continuum) are politically overrepresented in the parliament of the Netherlands, and whether this overrepresentation may produce benefits for more urbanized municipalities and their inhabitants. Access to public funding would be an example of these benefits. Fig. 1 shows how I am conceptualizing mechanisms of overrepresentation. We can hypothesize that political overrepresentation translates into benefits such as political attention, power, and increased access to public funding. In other words, politicians from an overrepresented geographical unit will direct attention and funding towards similar kinds of places.

Increased access to public funding may also lead to economic and social benefits for a certain subset of citizens by generating economic development (Rodríguez-Pose & Garcilazo, 2015). A relatively high level of public funding for 'extremely urbanized municipalities', in particular, may help them to improve upon the economic growth they would have achieved without increased attention from the national government (Dumont, 2019). Therefore, political overrepresentation may support the economic success of certain municipalities.

3. Urban political overrepresentation in The Netherlands

To investigate potential place-based overrepresentation, I consider the degree of urbanization within each municipality in the Netherlands. Intuitively, the population size of the municipality would be an appropriate measure. However, the population size does not always reflect how 'urbanized' municipalities are. The process of municipal amalgamation in the Netherlands has created large and relatively rural municipalities with many inhabitants, which do not always have a large central city or town (Allers, De Natris, Rienks, & De Greef, 2021). The degree of urbanization within each municipality is therefore more helpful in measuring political urban overrepresentation. Statistics Netherlands (2020a) classifies municipalities in the Netherlands into five categories concerning their degree of urbanization (Table 1). This is based on the average density of addresses within a 1-km distance of all the addresses within a municipality (Statistics Netherlands, 2020a). These categories can be used to group together municipalities from throughout the country and to assess the impacts of government policies on certain kinds of municipalities. Fig. 2 shows how the municipalities are divided across the country.

I then use the place of residence of politicians on the national political level in the Netherlands to account for political overrepresentation. Previous research on the economic effects of political overrepresentation also used the place of residence of politicians to measure the extent to which politicians favor these places (Ansolabehere et al., 2002; Harjunen et al., 2021). Literature on 'friends and neighbors



Fig. 1. Theoretical effects of political overrepresentation.

Table 1
Categories of municipalities in the Netherlands.

Degree of urbanization of municipalities	Addresses per km ²
Not urbanized	<500
Hardly urbanized	500–1000
Moderately urbanized	1000–1500
Strongly urbanized	1500–2500
Extremely urbanized	>2500

Source: [Statistics Netherlands \(2020a\)](#).

voting’ shows that political candidates often get support from voters who live in their region, especially in rural municipalities and smaller cities ([Herron & Lynch, 2019](#); [Key, 1949](#)).

In October 2017, the Netherlands had 249 politicians at the national level. This included the 24 members of the Cabinet, the 150 members of the House of Representatives (Tweede Kamer), and the 75 members of the Senate (Eerste Kamer). These politicians decide on the national government’s policies ([Gallagher et al., 2011](#)). By October 31, 2017, the new Rutte Cabinet had been formed, and those MPs and senators who had taken a seat in the cabinet had been replaced by members who used to be lower on the party list. The members of the cabinet, House of Representatives, and Senate would decide on upcoming governmental policies and laws. Therefore, this is a helpful moment to examine urban

political overrepresentation and how this relates to benefits for over-represented municipalities. The place of residence of national politicians in the Netherlands is publicly available on governmental websites ([Kiesraad, 2015](#); [Kiesraad, 2017](#); [Parlementair Documentatie Centrum \[PDC\], 2023](#)). This enables the analysis of which places of varying degrees of urbanization are politically overrepresented or underrepresented. I was able to identify addresses for all but one (248 out of 249) of the country’s national politicians ([Kiesraad, 2015](#); [Kiesraad, 2017](#); [PDC, 2023](#)). To investigate whether these politicians represented the voters during the 2017 election, I performed goodness-of-fit tests. A p-value in this test lower than 0.05 means that political representation deviates significantly from the size of the electorate.

As one can discern from [Table 2](#), politicians who reside in extremely urbanized municipalities are overrepresented at the national political level. The p-value is under 0.001. Extremely urbanized municipalities are overrepresented insofar as they have more than double the number of politicians at the national level than one would expect from their voter share. Additionally, all other categories have fewer MPs than one would expect from their voter share. Not urbanized and hardly urbanized municipalities are the most underrepresented at the national political level in the Netherlands, while extremely urbanized municipalities are heavily overrepresented. Prior national elections in the Netherlands displayed a similar pattern ([Kiesraad, 2006, 2010, 2012](#)).

Degree of Urbanization

- Extremely Urbanized
- Strongly Urbanized
- Moderatly Urbanized
- Hardly Urbanized
- Not Urbanized

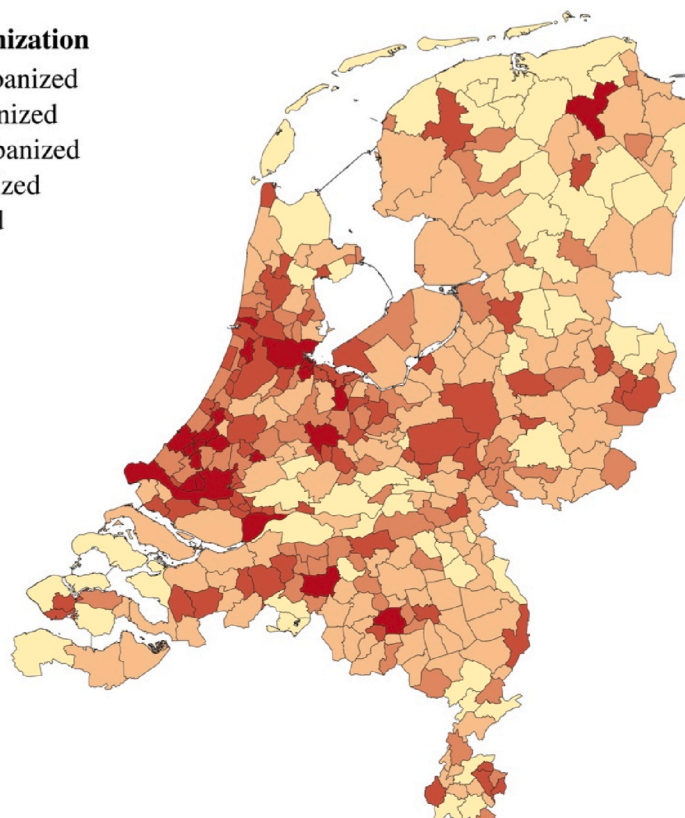


Fig. 2. Degree of urbanization by municipality in the Netherlands, 2019
Source: [Statistics Netherlands \(2020b\)](#).

Table 2
Voters and politicians in each category of Degree of Urbanization.

Degree of urbanization	Number of votes (2017)	Percentage of voters (2017)	Expected number of national politicians	Observed number of national politicians
Not urbanized	880,545	8	20	7
Hardly urbanized	2,410,546	23	57	28
Moderately urbanized	1,639,298	16	40	23
Strongly urbanized	3,203,979	30	74	67
Extremely urbanized	2,388,415	23	57	123
Total	10,469,618	100	248	248

Sources: [Statistics Netherlands \(2020b; 2020c\)](#); [Kiesraad \(2015\)](#); [Kiesraad \(2017\)](#); [PDC \(2023\)](#).

It is also valuable to show the situation for national politicians from governing parties. These politicians had the most influence on public funding decisions between 2017 and 2021 when there was a government with a narrow majority that consisted of politicians from four parties: the classical-liberal VVD ($n = 55$), the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) ($n = 37$), the social-liberal Democrats 66 (D66) ($n = 35$), and the Christian-social Christian Union [CU] ($n = 11$). [Table 3](#) shows how politicians from these parties represented their electorates during the 2017 general election in different categories of urbanization.

As [Table 3](#) shows, national politicians from the governing parties were, in geographical terms, overrepresenting voters in extremely urbanized municipalities. All governing parties had relatively more politicians than voters who resided in this category of municipality. This was seldom the case in municipalities with a lower degree of urbanization. For example, the CU had no national politicians who resided in moderately, hardly, or not urbanized municipalities, although 53.1% of their electorate lived in such a municipality.

4. Political benefits of political overrepresentation

Now that I have established the political overrepresentation of extremely urbanized municipalities, it is also important to determine if this overrepresentation affects policies for municipalities with different degrees of urbanization. I do this by investigating municipalities' access to public funding by degree of urbanization. As mentioned earlier, municipalities in the Netherlands combine high political autonomy with low fiscal autonomy. Compared to other European countries, they are relatively autonomous in policymaking ([Hesse & Sharpe, 1991](#); [Kersting & Vetter, 2013](#)). However, the national government is the most important funder of municipalities in the Netherlands ([Allers & Vermeulen, 2016](#)). When investigating whether extremely urbanized municipalities receive political benefits, it is crucial to understand how the national government functions and funds municipalities.

The Netherlands always has coalition governments consisting of multiple parties. The Rutte-III cabinet was formed in 2017 after lengthy negotiations. During the negotiation process, expert MPs from coalition parties worked out the details of their policy area on side tables, next to the party leaders' main negotiation table. During the tenure of the cabinet, these expert MPs were also involved in so-called 'cockpit talks,' in which they discussed policy solutions with the responsible cabinet ministers ([Louwerse & Timmermans, 2021](#)). The latter sometimes took a back seat, a process described as the 'governmentalisation of parliament' ([Koole, 2018](#)). Hence, although cabinet ministers formally decided, MPs from government parties could have been involved in discussions on how municipalities could access national government funding. Politically overrepresented, extremely urbanized municipalities may have benefited from this situation.

Table 3
Percentage of voters and politicians for parties per degree of urbanization.

Degree of urbanization (2019)	Number of votes (2017)	Percentage of votes per category (2017)	Percentage of total votes per party (2017)	Percentage of national politicians per party (2020)
Not urbanized				
VVD:	180,254	20.5	8.1	3.6
CDA:	160,890	18.3	12.4	8.1
D66:	76,902	8.7	6.0	2.8
CU:	38,535	4.4	10.8	0.0
Total	880,545	100.0	8.4	2.8
(including opposition):				
Hardly urbanized				
VVD:	545,377	22.6	24.4	18.2
CDA:	407,230	16.9	31.3	18.9
D66:	229,924	9.5	17.9	5.7
CU:	94,959	3.9	26.7	0.0
Total	2,410,546	100.0	23.0	11.2
(including opposition):				
Moderately urbanized				
VVD:	400,851	24.5	17.9	12.7
CDA:	236,653	14.4	18.2	16.2
D66:	183,781	11.2	14.3	2.8
CU:	55,553	3.4	15.6	0.0
Total	1,639,298	100.0	15.7	9.2
(including opposition):				
Strongly urbanized				
VVD:	679,929	21.2	30.4	20.0
CDA:	341,444	10.7	26.2	29.7
D66:	399,046	12.5	31.0	14.3
CU:	111,913	3.5	31.4	54.5
Total	3,203,979	100.0	30.6	26.9
(including opposition):				
Extremely urbanized				
VVD:	431,524	18.1	19.3	43.6
CDA:	152,998	6.4	11.8	27.0
D66:	395,297	16.6	30.7	74.3
CU:	55,211	2.3	15.5	45.5
Total	2,388,415	100.0	22.8	49.4
(including opposition):				
Total votes and percentages				
VVD:	2,238,351	21.4	100.0	98.1*
CDA:	1,301,796	12.4	100.0	99.9
D66:	1,285,819	12.3	100.0	99.9
CU:	356,271	3.4	100.0	100.0
Total	10,469,618	100.0	100.0	99.1
(including opposition):				

Sources: [Kiesraad \(2017\)](#); [PDC \(2023\)](#); [Kiesraad \(2015\)](#). *Not always 100.0%. Some senators are not registered in the Netherlands, and there can be rounding differences.

The municipal fund (Gemeentefonds) of the Netherlands is the most important funding instrument of the national government for municipalities. It consists of non-earmarked grants. Municipalities have considerable autonomy over how to spend these grants ([Rijksoverheid, 2020b](#)). The funding per municipality is based on a model that takes multiple elements into account, such as the geographical size of the municipality, the number of inhabitants, and their socio-economic and demographic characteristics ([Allers & Vermeulen, 2016](#); [Rijksoverheid, 2020b](#)). For example, a younger population means increased costs for school buildings and childcare, whereas a larger population likely leads to higher local infrastructure costs. Precisely how the municipal fund is divided is the subject of technical debates, with both more urbanized and less urbanized municipalities claiming that they should receive a larger share of the funding ([Bekkers, 2020](#); [Raad voor het Openbaar Bestuur, 2019](#)).

Next to the municipal fund, municipalities can receive earmarked (or

specific) grants from the national government (Allers & Vermeulen, 2016). For example, municipalities can receive money to improve air quality or to reduce educational backlogs amongst children in their municipality. Municipalities must spend specific grants directly on the specific issue for which the funds have been granted (Rijksoverheid, 2020c).

In addition, the national government of the Netherlands increasingly uses matching grants to fund municipalities. In 2015, the national government introduced 'city deals', a set of arrangements on one specific topic between the national government and multiple urban municipalities. However, other public or private partners may join (Agenda Stad, 2020a). Ordinarily, all involved partners contribute to funding the city deal (Hamers, Dignum, & Evers, 2017). City deals have been made around more sustainable cities, urban development, and health (Agenda Stad, 2020a).

In 2017, the coalition agreement of the Rutte III cabinet also introduced 'region deals', which were the result of the coalition negotiations. As the name suggests, a region deal involves a specific region, rather than multiple cities that may be located far from each other. It aims to tackle multiple issues through an integrated plan for which the national and lower levels of government provide funding. A region, consisting of one or more cooperating provinces and/or municipalities, can make a bid for a region deal when a new tranche of funding becomes available (Schouten, 2018). The region deals were presented as supportive to municipalities outside the central and urban regions. The responsible cabinet minister stated, 'This government is there for the whole of the Netherlands' and 'wants to improve the country, especially for those who feel that the government is not there for them.' (Mulder, 2020; Schouten, 2018, 2019). It was also an explicit goal to divide the funding equally over the country (Tweede Kamer, 2020).

The region deals cover a wide range of topics, such as sustainability, education quality, or renewal of the housing supply. The requirements for receiving public funding through a region deal are unspecific. A region deal should cover multiple topics, contribute to 'broad regional welfare,' and have sufficient funding from provinces and municipalities (Rijksdienst voor ondernemend Nederland [RVO], 2019; Rijksoverheid, 2020a). Ultimately, the cabinet formally decides which requests for public funding via the region deals are granted. Regions cannot protest the decision; nor does the cabinet openly publish why regions are selected (RVO, 2022). This makes the considerations less transparent, suggesting more room for lobbying. Rural regions in the Netherlands, which include fewer extremely urbanized municipalities, tend to have less lobbying power than their more urbanized counterparts (Meijers & Van der Wouw, 2019). Hence, the overrepresentation of extremely urbanized municipalities among national politicians from governing parties also increases the likelihood that financial benefits will accrue disproportionately to extremely urbanized municipalities and their inhabitants.

Recent governmental policies underscore how rural municipalities are far from being favored by the national government of the Netherlands. For example, Ubels, Bock, and Haartsen (2019) explain how severe budget cuts on municipalities led to the centralization of municipal services and facilities in core towns, thus reducing public services in rural villages. Van der Meulen (2021) describes how rural municipalities in regions dealing with depopulation lack sufficient funding. A recent advisory report, which the national government endorsed, specifically mentioned the long-term lack of attention from the national government for problems in rural municipalities (Remkes, 2022).

Notwithstanding the city and region deals, the national government also increasingly makes individual arrangements with municipalities on specific topics. The funding for these generally matching and/or earmarked grants comes from the Municipal Fund. Access to individual arrangements relies on political attention from the national government or legislature and the ability of municipalities to garner funding from these institutions (ROB, 2019). Therefore, individual arrangements

weaken both the transparency of governmental funding for municipalities in the Netherlands and the political autonomy of the latter (Bruinenberg, 2018).

To examine the effects of urban political overrepresentation, it is vital to investigate the access of municipalities to funding from the national government and to analyze how this relates to the political representation of municipalities based on their level of urbanization. Having more options to access public funding also increases the likelihood of receiving funding. This funding from the national government can be used to improve the lives of the inhabitants of the overrepresented municipalities. It thus also matters how much funding municipalities receive from specific grants and region deals. Therefore, the analysis focuses on both the amount of funding and the mode of access to funding. This is operationalized in the following two topics: 1) the content and distribution of the region deals and 2) the access that municipalities have to different types of grants from the national government. This operationalization also reveals how national politicians respond to problems in different categories of municipalities.

5. The differing focus within the region deals

This section analyses the volume of public funding municipalities with varying degrees of urbanization receive from the region deals. As mentioned earlier, the general criteria for applying for region deals call into question the transparency and fairness of the decision-making process. Contributing to 'broad regional welfare', for instance, is difficult to measure (Rijksoverheid, 2020a; RVO, 2019), and the decision-making considerations of the cabinet are not published. This section does not focus on the decision-making process but, rather, considers the outcome of the region deal allocation process.

The initial discourse about the region deals suggested they would primarily support the countryside and aim for an equal distribution over the country (Tweede Kamer, 2020). This leads to the expectation that municipalities with a lower degree of urbanization receive at least equal funding in comparison to more urbanized municipalities based on their population share. However, the granted deals in the first two tranches show a different pattern. Already within the coalition agreement, the government decided to spend most of the money in the first tranche of the region deals in more urbanized municipalities (Mulder, 2020; Regeerakkoord, 2017). From the outset, then, there has been a marked difference between the tone that was struck and the actual content of the region deals.

Table 4 shows the manifesto commitments of the four governing parties of Cabinet Rutte-III and what was negotiated in the coalition agreement. The CU, CDA, and D66 were making the most direct promise to create region deals. CU and CDA emphasized the importance of more investments in depopulating regions lacking extremely urbanized municipalities. Unsurprisingly, not urbanized and hardly urbanized municipalities are overrepresented among the CU and CDA electorate (See Table 3). D66, which disproportionately represents voters from 'extremely urbanized' municipalities, argued for investing in regions. This came next to their plans to invest in the 'vital cities' (D66, 2016) where they have strong electoral support. VVD, which has an equal representation across municipalities with different degrees of urbanization, had a clear manifesto focusing on urban investments.

Eventually, the coalition agreement contained region deals, but with a focus on investing in regions with extremely urbanized municipalities, such as Eindhoven and Rotterdam (Regeerakkoord, 2017). Ostensibly, the CU, CDA, and D66 won the process argument to create a system of region deals. However, despite a tone of support for the countryside being struck, the content of the first and most crucial tranche was targeted at VVD priorities. The U-turn of CDA, D66, and CU may be explained by the political overrepresentation of politicians from extremely urbanized municipalities among the national politicians who had negotiated this compromise. The coalition agreement thus provides an important explanation for the difference in tone and content of the

Table 4
Positions of coalition parties and coalition agreement on region deals, 2017.

Position on regional investments	
VVD	'We have a number of strong regions, such as Brainport Eindhoven, Foodvalley Wageningen, Energyport Northern Netherlands and the economic centers in the Randstad conurbation ... We want the government's policy to focus on a strategy to increase the competitiveness of the Dutch urban regions.'
CDA	Economic challenges are increasingly occurring at a regional level and they differ per region ... In depopulating regions, we ensure policies that stimulate and retain employment ... We see new opportunities for these regions through better cooperation, targeted investments and a solution-oriented attitude from governments ... We want more attention to the quality of life in areas outside cities.'
D66	'D66 wants regions to take the lead in boosting success clusters ... Many social, economic and spatial developments take place on a larger scale than the municipality, in the region ... In addition to strong cities, D66 invests in vital regions. This responds strongly to the different economic challenges per region.'
Christian Union	'The Christian Union wants an investment program for regions ... We want to maintain and, if possible, strengthen employment in the region ... The national government, together with the local and provincial authorities, can strengthen the regional economy ... Structural strengthening of the economy and achievable facilities keep depopulating regions liveable.'
Coalition agreement	'In this government's term of office, a total of 900 million euros will be reserved for tackling regional problems and bottlenecks, including nuclear issues ... Zeeland, Eindhoven, Rotterdam South ... The national government makes 'deals' with decentralized authorities, in which they commit to cooperate on new solutions.'

Sources: VVD (2016); CDA (2016); D66 (2016); ChristenUnie (2016); Regeerakkoord (2017).

region deals. The unexpectedly high funding for extremely urbanized municipalities supports the idea of political benefits for the types of municipalities that are politically overrepresented.

The estimated funding in Table 5 shows that extremely urbanized municipalities are overrepresented amongst recipients of the region deals. Sixteen deals have been granted in the first two tranches (Rijksoverheid, 2020a).¹ Extremely urbanized municipalities receive double

Table 5
Estimated funding from closed region deals for each degree of urbanization.

Degree of Urbanization	Expected funding as share of population (in million euros)	Actual funding (in million euros)	Difference between actual and expected funding
Not urbanized	44	45.9	+4%
Hardly urbanized	121	66	-45%
Moderately urbanized	82.5	82.3	+0%
Strongly urbanized	170.5	91.4	-46%
Extremely urbanized	132	264.4	+100%
Total	550.0	550	0%

Sources: Rijksoverheid (2020a); RVO (2019); Statistics Netherlands (2020c).

¹ Two deals have been excluded from the analysis. The first focused on the Dutch Caribbean Islands, which are not classified with a 'degree of urbanization'. The second just focused on disposing nuclear waste and not on broader welfare for the region.

what their population share justifies [+100%]. Moderately urbanized (+0%) and not urbanized municipalities (+4%) receive what one would expect given their population share. However, hardly urbanized [-45%] and strongly urbanized municipalities [-46%] receive considerably less than expected, given their share of the total population. This shows that especially the extremely urbanized municipalities, which are the only category with political overrepresentation in terms of place of residence, benefit disproportionately from the region deals.

Interestingly, the electorate in extremely urbanized municipalities is not necessarily government-leaning. VVD, CU, and, especially, CDA, perform stronger in less urbanized municipalities. Only D66 has an electorate that tends to favor extremely urbanized municipalities. Compared to municipalities with a lower degree of urbanization, the governing parties received the lowest vote share in extremely urbanized municipalities during the 2017 election (see Table 3). However, these municipalities are heavily overrepresented among the national politicians from governing parties.

In addition, the small volume of funding hampers the ability of the region deals to achieve the ambitious goals behind the policy program. Over €100 million per deal went to two region deals within the first tranche, which were already proposed in the coalition agreement. These cover Rotterdam South, which is extremely urbanized, and Brainport Eindhoven, in which municipalities are extremely and strongly urbanized (Regeerakkoord, 2017; Rijksoverheid, 2020a; Statistics Netherlands, 2020c). A maximum of €40 million per deal was available for the remaining deals, which were going to regions that covered more municipalities. In the case of the region deal in Midden- and West-Brabant, a €10 million grant was supposed to solve multiple problems in 25 municipalities ranging from not urbanized to extremely urbanized (Rijksoverheid, 2019). With such small grants from the national government, it becomes tough to achieve the ambitious goal of 'broader welfare' within each region (Bruinenberg, 2018; Mulder, 2020; Rijksoverheid, 2020a; RVO, 2019). As this section has shown, the volume of public funding that municipalities receive from the region deals is disproportionately high for extremely urbanized municipalities. Especially in later tranches, the funding volume may be too limited to achieve the ambitious policy goals behind the region deals.

6. Differences in requesting grants from the national government

This section examines the extent to which municipalities with varying degrees of urbanization have access to public funding from the national government. It analyses the accessibility of city deals, region deals, and specific grants provided for certain kinds of problems. Extremely urbanized municipalities, I will show, have benefits over other types of municipalities for three reasons.

First, during the investigated period, almost all extremely urbanized and some strongly urbanized municipalities had an additional option to request funding from the national government through the city deal. Only members of the G4 and the G40 can apply for city deals. The G4 is the network of the four most populous municipalities of the Netherlands: Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Den Haag, and Utrecht (Dukes & Van der Wusten, 2014). The G40 is a network of 40 medium and large municipalities (G40, 2020). These networks also help decide which topics the city deals will cover in the upcoming period. Almost all municipalities in the G4 and G40 are either extremely urbanized or strongly urbanized (G40, 2020; Statistics Netherlands, 2020c). Hence, the city deals provide an additional opportunity to request funding from the national government for almost all extremely urbanized municipalities and about one-third of the strongly urbanized municipalities.

Second, access to city deals has given urban municipalities a networking advantage. Besides access to public funding, the process around the city deals aims to 'improve the access of urban municipalities to relevant policymakers who work within the national government' (Agenda Stad, 2020b, p.2). The system of city deals thus helps most of

the extremely urbanized municipalities and 26 strongly urbanized municipalities to strengthen their networks within the national government. This, in turn, may have led to favorable policy decisions from the cabinet that go beyond the specific city deal, such as more individual arrangements on specific topics. For example, the cabinet may become aware of educational backlogs in an extremely urbanized municipality and fund their ambition to reduce these. This would benefit the inhabitants of these municipalities.

Third, extremely urbanized municipalities have easier access to some specific grants from the national government than other types of municipalities. In some instances, this makes sense. For example, certain public services or social problems are likelier to occur in extremely urbanized municipalities. However, the easier access to specific grants becomes problematic when it applies to topics where one would expect equal treatment of extremely urbanized and other categories of municipalities. This becomes clear when comparing the national government's approach to the teacher shortage in cities with the shortage of general practitioners in the countryside. Recently, the national government announced a €116 million budget to combat the shortage of teachers in the extremely urbanized G4 municipalities and the strongly urbanized municipality of Almere (Rijksoverheid, 2020d). Conversely, the national government did not budget to combat the shortage of general practitioners in the countryside of the Netherlands, which has been especially problematic in hardly or not urbanized municipalities (Christiaanse, 2020; Statistics Netherlands, 2020c). The €116 million allocated to reducing the teacher shortage in the G4 and Almere also sharply contrasts with the much smaller funding allocated through the region deals.

The different response of the national government to the shortage of teachers and the shortage of general practitioners is in line with the varying amount of attention paid to both problems in parliament. In the first three years after the 2017 election, the term 'teacher shortage' ('lerarentekort') has been mentioned on 88 different days of plenary sessions (Tweede Kamer, 2021a). The parliamentary attention paid to the teacher shortage probably forced the national government to act and spend €116 million on this issue. The politicians who placed the teacher shortage on the agenda generally live in extremely urbanized municipalities (Kiesraad, 2017). Conversely, the term 'shortage of general practitioners' ('huisartsentekort') was mentioned on only two different days of plenary sessions (Tweede Kamer, 2021b). Unsurprisingly, this did not lead to earmarked grants for rural municipalities to diminish the shortage of general practitioners. The response was that regions should solve the issue themselves (Ministerie van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport [VWS], 2019; VWS, 2020). The lack of national politicians from hardly urbanized and not urbanized municipalities may explain the lack of attention and money accorded to this problem. Among the members of parliament who deal with healthcare issues, hardly- and not urbanized municipalities are scarcely represented (Kiesraad, 2017).

Extremely urbanized municipalities thus have benefits over other municipalities. The national government provides them with more public funding opportunities and an advantageous networking position. Furthermore, the contrasting responses of the national government to the shortage of urban teachers and the shortage of rural general practitioners demonstrate that extremely urbanized municipalities have easier access to specific grants from the national government than hardly urbanized or not urbanized municipalities. However similar these problems appear, what is good for the goose appears to be bad for the gander. Political overrepresentation may explain the benefits of access to public funding for extremely urbanized municipalities because national politicians have actively enabled city deals and demanded specific grants to solve specific urban problems.

Furthermore, the increasing volume of individual arrangements between the national government and individual municipalities on specific topics is more difficult for politically underrepresented municipalities. If funding for municipalities becomes less dependent on general requirements, then there is an increased opportunity for favoritism. Consequently, access to specific grants, especially matching grants, such

as the region deals, becomes easier for those with strong networks and good lobbying skills. It provides space for 'friends and neighbor voting' that favors overrepresented municipalities. Previous research has shown that politically overrepresented regions tend to profit from solid network contacts and regional or local favoritism, which helps them receive more public funding (Fiva & Halse, 2016; Knight, 2008; Sørensen, 2003). A further increase in individual arrangements will thus likely strengthen the opportunities available to politically overrepresented municipalities. In the case of the Netherlands, this would help extremely urbanized municipalities. Hence, although it promises to help underrepresented municipalities, using systems such as the region deals may hamper the opportunities within the regions it seeks to support.

7. Discussion & conclusion

I have described in this article how urban political overrepresentation helps to create political benefits for extremely urbanized municipalities and their inhabitants, by analysing access to public funding. It is important to stress that the findings in this paper suggest associations rather than causal relationships. To prove the latter, more systematic forms of research are required. However, the correlation between political overrepresentation and access to public funding may serve as a first indication of excessive political benefits for the most highly urbanized municipalities and their inhabitants.

National politicians in the Netherlands overwhelmingly reside in extremely urbanized municipalities and, to a lesser extent, in municipalities with a lower degree of urbanization. Between 2017 and 2020, extremely urbanized municipalities were overrepresented amongst the places of residence of national politicians in the Netherlands. This political overrepresentation may have influenced the policies of the government in the Netherlands. Although politicians from extremely urbanized municipalities do not openly claim to represent their interests specifically, these municipalities have had more and easier access to funding opportunities than other municipalities. As the region deals illustrate, extremely urbanized municipalities benefitted disproportionately from a public funding program that ministers had promised would rectify the existing unequal division of public funding (Schouten, 2018). Their political overrepresentation thus provides extremely urbanized municipalities with unearned advantages in the form of political benefits.

The findings of this research align with existing research on political overrepresentation and the emergent literature on the geography of discontent. Political overrepresentation has already been shown on the regional level (Latner & McGann, 2005; Thomassen & Andeweg, 2004) and is now shown through categories of municipalities. Political overrepresentation has proven to produce better access to public funding for the overrepresented group in multiple contexts (Bovens & Wille, 2017; Gilardi, 2015; Schakel & Van der Pas, 2020). Political-economic research has shown how this applies to geographical regions (Ansola-behere et al., 2002; Fiva & Halse, 2016; Knight, 2008). This paper shows that urban political overrepresentation creates a series of advantages for extremely urbanized municipalities, such as better access to public funding. This urban political overrepresentation may help to explain both economic inequality and resentment in municipalities with fewer political privileges. This supports earlier findings on rural resentment and the geography of discontent (Cramer, 2016; Dumont, 2019; Munis, 2020; Rodriguez-Pose, 2018). Political overrepresentation adds another explanatory tool to these lines of thought. As most municipalities in the Netherlands are not extremely urbanized, the resentment may be more than just a rural-peripheral phenomenon and may span widely across the country. This is what the political victory of the Farmer Citizen Movement [BBB] seems to suggest (Bounds, 2023).

There are a variety of complementary explanations for the political overrepresentation of extremely urbanized municipalities, beyond the simple observation of where politicians live. First, the location of

parliament and government in the political capital of The Hague could explain the political overrepresentation of extremely urbanized municipalities. The Hague and several surrounding municipalities are extremely urbanized (Statistics Netherlands, 2020b). Second, overrepresentation might be related to the location of universities in the Netherlands. National politicians may have stayed in the extremely urbanized university city where they studied. However, these explanations do not change the mechanism of political overrepresentation and its effects. Bovens and Wille (2017) argue that the existing political overrepresentation of highly educated citizens leads to policies favoring these citizens. This could also apply to the overrepresented municipalities in which these politicians live.

To be sure, better access to public funding may not be solely the result of urban political overrepresentation. But other plausible factors can still be related to political overrepresentation. Extremely urbanized municipalities, for instance, may have a higher return on investment for public funding and consequently may deserve better access to it (Glaeser, 2011). However, if one considers the redistributive and equity aims of domestic government spending, then one might expect that the amount each municipality receives from the Municipal Fund should reflect each municipality's actual needs (Allers & Vermeulen, 2016; Rijksoverheid, 2020b). This Municipal Fund is highly influential in the access to public funding for municipalities in the Netherlands. It was not within the scope of this paper to analyze its material impacts on the wellbeing of people living in certain kinds of municipalities. However, earlier research shows that small municipalities, which tend to be less urbanized, lack the funding to deliver sufficient social services to their inhabitants under the current budgets of the Municipal Fund (Van der Meulen, 2021). This could also be a result of political overrepresentation.

Extremely urbanized municipalities are also likely to be more effective at lobbying for investments than others. Meijers and Van der Wouw (2019) pointed at this phenomenon on the regional level. Municipalities are not merely passive victims of decisions by the national government but also active agents who impact these decisions (Galagher et al., 2011). Extremely urbanized municipalities may have better-trained staff that can write qualitatively more robust requests for funding from the national government. Many municipalities are part of networks with other municipalities that are roughly the same size and share the same degree of urbanization. These networks lobby at multiple governmental levels for the interests of their municipalities (Dukes & Van der Wusten, 2014; G40, 2020). Effective lobbying and strong networks increase public funding accessibility (Sørensen, 2003). Prior research suggests lobbying tends to be more effective when lobbyists share characteristics and networks with their lobbying targets (Thomas & Hrebencar, 2009). Hence, urban political overrepresentation may lead to the accrual of benefits to extremely urbanized municipalities. The arguments that lobbyists from such municipalities would put forward would be more understandable for the politicians who live in the same category of municipalities.

Furthermore, the electoral system of the Netherlands (Latner & McGann, 2005) enables favoritism towards the type of municipalities that are also politically overrepresented. Friends and neighbors voting, which helps explain political capital in other countries (Herron & Lynch, 2019; Put, von Schoultz, & Isotalo, 2020), may be less effective in the Dutch system, which only has one national district. Since voters can come from throughout the country, it makes more sense for politicians to appeal to voters in comparable municipalities than in their home region or cities. This can be done by improving public funding access for those municipalities. In this way, even individually underrepresented municipalities may profit from the overrepresentation of their category. The access to city deals for extremely urbanized and strongly urbanized municipalities and the specific grants for the teacher shortage serve as examples.

An important question arises from this study about the comparability of the Netherlands to other countries in Europe. Compared to other

European countries, not urbanized municipalities in the Netherlands are geographically close to more urbanized ones (Eurostat, 2018). One may argue that this makes it a less useful example to test political urban overrepresentation. However, the PR electoral system of the Netherlands, with one district, highlights the importance of different categories of municipalities and encourages consideration of the ways certain types of places may be over- or under-represented regardless of election system (Latner & McGann, 2005). In other countries, political overrepresentation by urban category may also play a role in explaining the flow of government funds to certain places and groups. This may allow for a more subtle analysis than that suggested by the idea of 'internal colonialism' (Masseti & Schakel, 2015). This idea can only be tested on the regional level, whereas testing access to funding on the municipal level reveals differences between urban and rural places.

Future research can deepen the knowledge of the existence and consequences of political benefits for extremely urbanized municipalities and politically overrepresented categories of places and people. As McIntosh (1988) introduced, the concept of 'privilege' could be a helpful angle to investigate the political benefits resulting from political overrepresentation.

Future research can also examine if urban political overrepresentation benefits all urban municipalities in the same category equally, or whether it favors particular municipalities that are better networked. Relatedly, we might ask if center-periphery relationships intersect in any ways within urban categories. Alongside this, researchers can investigate the impact of the geographical representation of party members upon the focus of their political parties. Finally, the potential economic and social benefits that individual citizens receive could be investigated. Who profits from urban political overrepresentation? And how do those profits become visible to those in underrepresented places? After all, what is at stake here is the creation of a more equal landscape of political benefits that can effectively counter place-based political resentment.

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Colours in print

Colours should not be used in print.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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