

Exit, voice and loyalty in the Netherlands

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Native Dutch are emigrating from the Netherlands in surprisingly large numbers. This column shows that most Dutch emigrants are choosing to exit due to dissatisfaction with the quality of the public domain, particularly high population density. Is their exit a vote of no confidence in the Dutch government?

For the fifth year in a row, emigration from the Netherlands exceeded immigration last year, reaching 123,000 emigrants, which amounts to 7.5 emigrants per 1000 inhabitants. Dutch media has repeatedly reported this phenomenon because it caught demographic forecasters by surprise. The last emigration wave occurred fifty years ago, and at present the Netherlands is the only Western European country experiencing net emigration, although similar trends are visible in the UK (Salt and Rees, 2006) and to lesser extent in Germany.

People leaving the Netherlands on such a large scale has worried the media and politicians. The big Dutch puzzle is that it contradicts common knowledge and economic logic. The reason why immigrants come to the United States or Europe has been widely studied and the general driving force behind these migration flows is thought to be a higher standard of living (cf. Hatton and Williamson, 2005). The Netherlands is one of the most prosperous countries in the world, so why are people leaving a country that has been immigrants' destination for so many years?

To answer this question, we examined national data to see who has left and surveyed a representative sample of the Dutch in 2005 to learn who had emigration plans. To generate more in-depth insight into the characteristics of the Dutch emigrant, we also carried out a survey among a focus group of potential emigrants who had visited an emigrants' fair. In 2007, with the help of [Statistics Netherlands](#), we tracked the whereabouts of all those surveyed in 2005.

Who has left?

National emigration figures for 1999 to 2006 show that men are twice as likely to emigrate as women, and it is mostly the young (under 30) who emigrate. Furthermore, it is the Dutch in the top decile of the income distribution who are most likely to emigrate. Sixty-nine percent of Dutch emigrants choose a European destination. It should not be a surprise that most emigrants move to one of the neighbouring countries Germany and Belgium. However, it is well established that this applies mainly to cross-border migration, where people live just across the border and still work in the Netherlands. High housing and land prices in the Netherlands drive many to move to Belgium or Germany, which offer spacious houses that are almost unaffordable for middle-income households in the Netherlands. When Belgium and Germany are left out of the equation, 31% of emigrants are headed to European destinations. The US and Canada account for another 15%. Table 1 lists the top ten destinations for native Dutch emigrants.

Table 1 Where do Dutch emigrants go?

	Destination	Frequency distribution	Age at time of departure	% self-employed	% single
1	Belgium	21.1	40.3	9.0	24.8

2	Germany	17.1	40.6	7.2	24.3
3	France	6.5	45.5	10.3	20.9
4	USA	6.4	35.6	3.3	29.5
5	UK	6.1	32.8	2.2	42.6
6	Spain	5.9	43.7	9.6	25.9
7	Netherlands Antilles and Aruba	5.5	35.5	4.3	26.2
8	Australia	3.3	33.9	4.8	34.3
9	Canada	2.7	38.2	17.8	20.0
10	Switzerland	2.0	36.2	3.1	33.2

Source: Statistics Netherlands

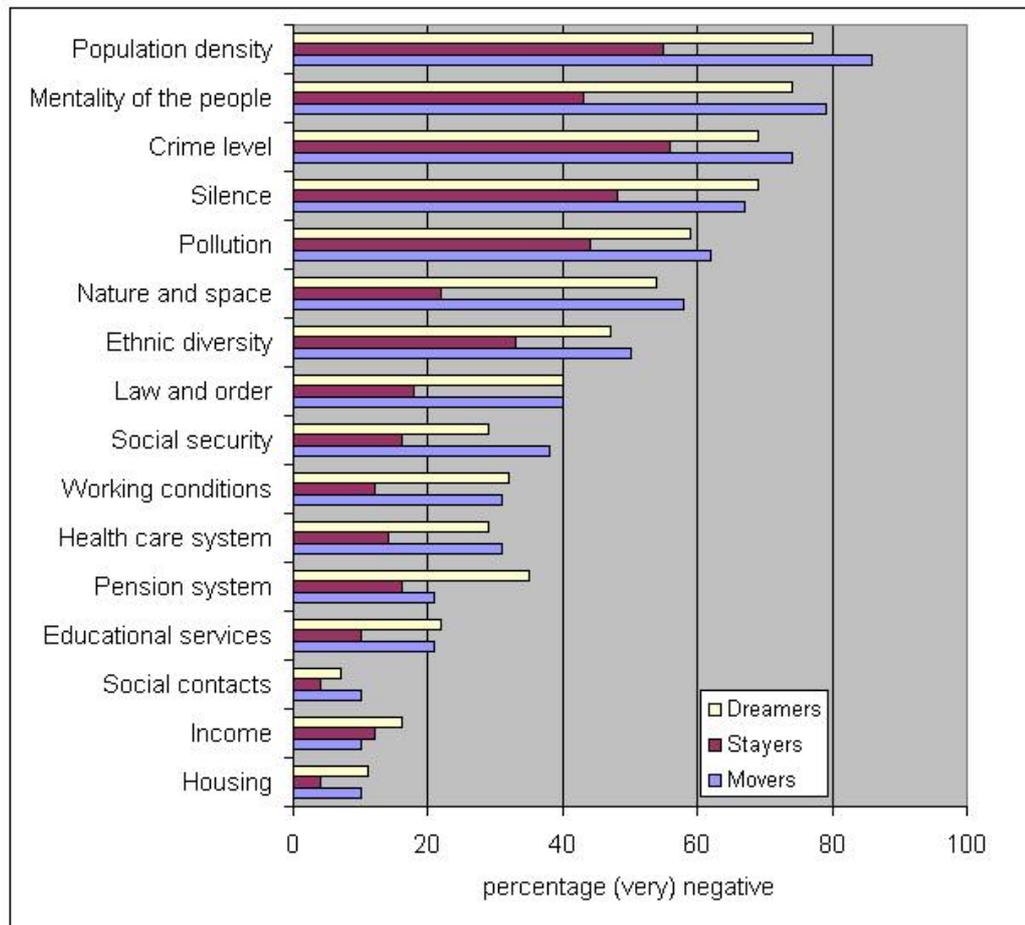
Why leave?

Based on our emigration survey in 2005, we established that 3% of the Dutch population had rather firm emigration plans. Many fulfilled their intentions: 24% had left after two years. Considering the fact that emigration is a complex process tied up with a lot of red tape and long-lasting problems such as selling a house or a business, this percentage is quite high.

The thousand-dollar question surrounding the Dutch emigration wave is, of course, why leave? Examining the determinants of emigration intentions and subsequent actions reveals a clear picture. The determinants may be classified into two groups: (a) the individual characteristics that one would expect to be relevant if emigration were a matter of private gains (like age, human capital, health, networks, psychological personality characteristics) and (b) the provision and perceived quality of the public domain of life in the Netherlands. Every individual depends on the actions and solidarity of others and perhaps more so in a crowded country such as the Netherlands which is also known for its extensive welfare state. The following elements were determined – based on a statistical analysis – to represent the public domain: (1) the Dutch welfare state and institutions which provide the public goods and services (law and order, social security, education, health care); (2) the quality of the public space (noise pollution, space, nature, crowdedness); and (3) the evaluation of social problems addressed by the government, like crime, pollution, and ethnic tensions.

The results of our study reveal that both the private and the public domain of life are important to understanding emigration from a high-income country like the Netherlands. The more negative one is about the public domain, the more likely it is that one will actually emigrate (see Figure 1). Of course, the Dutch who stayed are also negative about large parts of the public domain, but emigrants (“movers” and “dreamers”, i.e. those who intended to emigrate but have not yet) are far more negative than those staying behind.¹ The biggest difference between emigrants and those staying behind is the evaluation of the quality of public space. Without knowing how people feel about the quality of the public domain, large-scale emigration would remain a mystery.

Figure 1 Evaluation of the living conditions in the Netherlands, by migration status



Note: Dreamers are Dutch who intended to emigrate but have not (yet) done so; stayers are Dutch who did not intend to emigrate and have indeed stayed; movers are Dutch who intended to emigrate and have done so.

Of course, one may wonder whether all those aspects the emigrants loath will be much better in their country of destination. At the time of the survey, we only asked about their expectations, and in this respect all emigrants believed the public space would be far better and the social problems less severe in their "promised land". It is striking that only 17% believed they would attain a higher income abroad and even 29% expected that their income would drop.

Who remains loyal?

The fact that Dutch leave their country for reasons that are directly tied to the quality of the public domain makes one wonder how many, disillusioned with exercising their voice, would abandon loyalty and head for the exit (Hirschman, 1970). We performed a counterfactual analysis to assess the importance of the public domain in explaining emigration intentions (see Van Dalen and Henkens, 2007). Our calculations suggest that if all Dutch held extremely negative evaluations of the public domain, approximately 20% of the population (16 million inhabitants) would be inclined to leave the country. Population pressure is an especially strong driving force. Of course, one could also turn this gloomy outcome around, as 80% remain loyal. However, this "loyal" majority must be a very frustrated group of people.

Conclusion

Our study suggests that the quality of the public domain is an important part of quality of life, and those Dutch who have moved are implicitly casting a vote of no confidence in those who govern the nation. This lesson may also be of some relevance to other European countries where emigration has taken off and crowdedness has become a concern. For example, England's population density is

similar to that of the Netherlands (394 inhabitants per square kilometre), and [British surveys](#) seem to register the same type of dissatisfaction witnessed in the Netherlands.

As people forego “voice” by choosing their “exit” option, national governments find themselves in competitions previously restricted to local governments. Perhaps that is the true sign that we live in the age of globalisation.

References

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¹ The only exception to this rule is with respect to the income one earns in the Netherlands.

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Comments

I am a Dutch 'mover' (I

On October 6th, 2008 norvo says:

I am a Dutch 'mover' (I moved 3 years ago from the Netherlands to Ireland) and find this study interesting, however I have talked to a large number Dutch people living abroad and also to a number of 'dreamers' still intending to leave and find that the main reason why people want to leave has nothing to do with the government but more with the possibility of gaining work experience, higher salaries, wanting to experience the world (why limit yourself to one little country while we are all world citizens - keep in mind that Dutch people always have moved around a lot to explore and experience life abroad, with globalization this has only become easier) and having international partners (as in girlfriend/boyfriend/husband/wife/etc).

Granted, the Dutch regulations are causing way too much red tape and this leads to dissatisfaction (esp. when having international partners). But most other countries have similar red tape. For example, it is unbelievable that within the EU the free market still does not apply to pension plans on a European scale (meaning I can not choose to get a German or Dutch pension plan from my employer while I work in Ireland, why not??). Same goes for health care, etc. I would love to see a free market in this on a European scale.

One more thing that needs to be considered is that the Dutch government is requiring people who move abroad for a few years to unregister as resident, while most other EU countries do not require this (this could mess up the stats a bit). This also makes it more difficult for people out who want to go abroad for just a few years to gain work experience, because why return to the Netherlands while it was almost impossible to grow any capital/social benefits/etc in the home country? It may become easier to stay where you are or just go to another country where there is less red tape or has something else appealing.

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