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(Un)successful crisis mobilisation: migration versus climate change

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Citation

Dooremalen, T. van. (2026). (Un)successful crisis mobilisation: migration versus climate change. In M. Hurenkamp & T. de Waal (Eds.), *Citizenship in nativist times*. Leuven University Press. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4306976>

Version: Corrected Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4306976>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Chapter Title: (Un)Successful Crisis Mobilisation: Migration Versus Climate Change

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Book Title: Citizenship in Nativist Times

Book Editor(s): Menno Hurenkamp, Tamar de Waal

Published by: Leuven University Press. (2026)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.37866996.25>

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(Un)Successful Crisis Mobilisation: Migration Versus Climate Change

Thijs van Dooremalen

Introduction

In the last decades, calling out a migration crisis has been an attractive discursive move for politicians in Western countries (Van Reekum *et al.*, 2012): it often brings them both media attention and electoral success. A big part of Jan Willem Duyvendak's work of roughly the last 25 years has focused on understanding this attraction and its effects: why does the migration crisis claim to resonate so much, and what are its political and societal consequences? Calling out a climate crisis, on the other hand, often resonates way less strongly in the same societies. That is, many citizens and political parties agree that climate change is a significant problem, and policies to tackle it have been developed. But the idea of it as one of today's biggest crises and the willingness to implement measures with the same level of urgency as in the case of migration are often lacking. Or, to put it into the vocabulary of this book: it is currently easier to *culturalise* than to *climatise* citizenship.

What can explain this discrepancy? I wrote my PhD thesis on responses to the Islamic-inspired terrorist event 9/11 (Van Dooremalen, 2019), and have in recent years expanded my research to the effects of extreme weather events (e.g., Van Dooremalen & Smith, 2025). A key reason for this expansion is that these two types of events embody the discrepancy: whereas Islamic terrorism is usually considered a clear call for stricter immigration and migrant integration policies, extreme weather hardly ever turns into a reason to intensify climate policies. Jan Willem Duyvendak has written surprisingly little about climate politics. He has published a bit about the environment (Koopmans & Duyvendak, 1995; Duyvendak, 1996), but not much in the last decades. And on the specific topic of climate change – as far as I know – basically nothing. However, his work on topics such as mobilisation and framing does offer several explanatory clues for why

crisis claiming does (not) turn into a success. In this chapter, I will engage with this work to unravel the discrepancy of (un)successful crisis claiming between the cases of migration and climate change.

The Objectivist Fallacy

A first obvious explanation would be to consider the objective nature of the two problems. The reasoning then would be: migration problems are all over the place in most Western societies. New flows of refugees keep coming, and migrants and their children cause all kinds of nuisance, such as unemployment and crime. One could therefore say: this problem is objectively a very serious one, worthy of crisis claiming. This kind of reasoning is currently a very prominent one outside of academia. But it also continues to gain traction within it. For example, in a recent book on the 2015 European refugee crisis, Kriesi *et al.* (2024, pp. 73–77) use what they call “problem pressure” as a measure of national crisis severity: the larger a country’s number of incoming refugees, the greater its crisis.

However, an argument that was already present in Duyvendak’s early work is that objective problem conditions on their own can never explain the level of concern they raise among citizens. Nor can they account for the number of protests held or policy proposals formulated to address them. For example, in 1996, Duyvendak wrote about the environmental movement (originally in Dutch, my translation): *Whether an environmental organisation takes action and what resources it uses to do so depends not on the «objective» severity of the environmental crisis, but on the organisation’s subjective perception of this crisis. This perception, in turn, is colored by the opportunities for addressing the situation – in other words, by the political context* (Duyvendak, 1996, pp. 144–145).

Many empirical examples demonstrate that “objectivist” crisis explanations do not hold. Why, for example, would the objective conditions of migration problems create such severe crisis feelings, while the objective nature of climate problems, which are extensively documented by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), do so to a much smaller degree? Or why did the claims about the “multicultural drama” (Scheffer, 2000) gain widespread acceptance in the Netherlands at the turn of the century, while the integration of Moroccan- and Turkish-Dutch was actually improving during this period? And why do the current migration

debates in many countries often focus so much on refugees, when they generally constitute the smallest group of migrants, and the larger group of labour migrants also causes all sorts of social problems (De Haas, 2023)?

In other words, even if we could say that one problem is objectively worse than another, then that *as such* could never explain differences in (un)successful crisis claiming. A counterargument for the specific comparison of migration versus climate change could be that citizens simply know more about the former problem. This is a common argument in climate change discussions: if people only knew about its severity, then they would automatically start caring more. However, research shows that in a lot of Western societies, many citizens have sufficient knowledge about the effects of climate change (Norgaard, 2011, pp. 64–73). Moreover, in most of them, the number of climate change deniers is decreasing (Bretter and Schulz, 2023). In short, the discrepancy does not stem from a lack of public climate change knowledge.

Another counterargument might be that most Western citizens are simply more concerned about migration than about climate change. Yet, that is not a real explanation. It still begs the question: why is this the case?

Two Explanations: Opportunities and Framing

So, how do crisis perceptions then come into being? Duyvendak's work leads us to two answers: opportunities and framing.

On the topic of opportunities, a rich literature has been written over the last decades. Initially, the focus was on “political opportunity structures”. For instance, a Western European research project, which Duyvendak participated in, indicated that the new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s primarily gained political influence in countries that offered, among other things, favourable electoral systems (Kriesi *et al.*, 1992). The Dutch proportional system, which is very welcoming to newly founded political parties, gave parties that embodied the “spirit of 1968” the opportunity to directly enter Parliament, whereas within the French majoritarian system this proved much more difficult (Duyvendak, 1995). While revolutionary claims were widespread on the streets of Paris, they never really found their way into the centre of French politics. Later, the focus in the literature shifted to “discursive opportunity structures”: which ideas are considered (un)acceptable in public debates, and what are their inclusive and

exclusive effects? Supporting gay rights in the Netherlands, for example, became part of mainstream discourses when it turned out that this allowed for “othering” Muslims as homophobic (Hurenkamp *et al.*, 2012). Thus, according to the opportunities literature, explanations for successful crisis mobilisation must be sought in the (un)willing pathways that institutions like politics and the media provide for the rise of crisis perceptions.

Yet, this is not the whole story. In Duyvendak’s recent work, there is more emphasis on the power of actors to, through clever framing actions, exploit political or discursive opportunities in such ways that their claims have more impact. As Broer and Duyvendak (2011) demonstrated, actors are not only *confronted* with structures that may or may not offer opportunities for success. They can also *reflect* on these structures and, through confrontation, *learn* how to use them to the benefit of their cause.

Obviously, some actors are better at this than others. *The Return of the Native* (Duyvendak & Kešić, 2022) shows how, in particular, right-wing populist politicians skilfully deploy and innovate a nativist discourse to pit citizens against one another and win elections. The last part of this book consists of a call to action, urging progressive politicians to reclaim the nation with a new, counter-nativist discourse.

Opportunities for Crisis Mobilisation

How can we, based on these explanations, understand (un)successful crisis mobilisation for the cases of migration and climate change? To start with, we can consider opportunities: what do these offer in many Western societies for mobilising concerns about these topics?

To explain the ease with which migration crises are currently being declared, we have to consider the fact that we still live in an era in which the nation-state remains a key reference point for many citizens. Through socialisation in institutions like schools and through media, they often develop the idea that their nation is an important part of their identity (Kuipers, 2013). As a result, it feels natural for many citizens to draw clear, culturalising boundaries (Lamont, 2000) between themselves and citizens from other countries. Hence, national identity often runs very deep; it is a “semiotic code” (Swidler, 2001) that cannot be adapted easily. Beautiful things can arise from this identity, as seen, for example, in Ukraine’s nationalism-inspired resistance against the Russian invasion. But it also

provides the grounds on which right-wing populists often build their claims, with migrants being framed as the ultimate threat to this identity (Duyvendak *et al.*, 2022).

Yet, the nation-state is not only a strong semiotic code, but it also offers a very attractive model for the good life to citizens in many Western societies. Belonging to a Western nation generally means having access to prosperity, a welfare state, and a high-status national identity. Having to share all this with migrants can feel threatening (Hochschild, 2018). These two discursive opportunities – the Western nation-state as a strong identity and as an attractive model – may explain why migration crisis mobilisation is often so successful.

If we compare this to opportunities for climate crisis mobilisation, the story is very different. For many citizens of Western societies, perceiving climate change as a big problem does not lead to preserving something attractive, but rather having the foresight of something rather unattractive. A world in which governments fully face climate change and take all sorts of measures to tackle it will imply that Western citizens have to give up many of the joys of their current lives, such as flying, eating meat, and so on. As Rebecca Elliott (2018) put it: it is a story of loss. Moreover, if we extend the comparison, the cause of the migration crisis can always be directed at the Other: refugees and ethnic minorities. Declaring this crisis does not harm the “own” native population. Coming to terms with the climate crisis, on the other hand, points the finger towards all citizens, requiring an overhaul of everyone’s lives. Therefore, it is not an attractive crisis to sell or buy.

Lastly, a parliament of people from the future does not exist. Thus, the political opportunity structures here also work against the development of real climate citizenship. The migration crisis feels nearby; the climate crisis is currently not yet as palpable as it will be in the future. And so, many citizens and politicians continue to live in a state of what we might call “soft denial”: they recognize that climate change is a problem, but its full consequences are not yet felt thoroughly. It remains “background noise” (Norgaard, 2011).

A different Playbook

But this is not the end of the story. As the part above on framing showed, there are always possibilities for actors to innovate existing discursive

opportunities. Right-wing populists were not always so electorally successful. They have become increasingly good at playing with the nativist narrative, which they more and more present as the only true narrative about their countries. This is often referred to as the “right-wing populist playbook” or “perpetuum mobile” (Wodak, 2015).

These days, it sometimes seems as if this is the only political playbook with potential for success. But would it not be possible for other political entrepreneurs to create a “climate crisis playbook”? In *Climate Change as Social Drama* (2015), Phil Smith and Nicolas Howe argue that the story of the climate crisis is often told through the wrong genres. A bureaucratic-scientific genre predominates (see also Hajer and Oomen, 2025), which is full of boring facts and stories from scientists and climate conferences. Facts matter (Duyvendak, 2025), but on their own, they do not offer a compelling narrative that will mobilise citizens. They have to be combined with other discursive elements.

Today, this is often an apocalyptic genre: stories of doom are being mobilised by climate movements such as Extinction Rebellion and Fridays for Future. However, on their own, doom stories are not enough either, as they often result in apathy. They should be combined with a more romantic or at least a positive genre, in which the climate crisis is the starting point of something beautiful. The genre should offer citizens a glimpse into a bright, sustainable future, as the nation-state narrative has been doing for centuries.

What such a narrative could more concretely look like and how it could gain traction is food for thought for another piece. It might seem overly optimistic to assume that it could actually become a success. However, if I have learned one key lesson from Duyvendak’s work, then it is that people’s worldviews are through and through socially constructed. Thus, there is always the possibility that they can be turned upside down.

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