Ethnic minorities in local politics: comparing Amsterdam and Paris

Michon, L.B.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Introduction

As a child I saw my father run in many elections, although he was never successful. Indeed, his best result was obtaining seven percent of the votes in one area of the constituency in which he was a candidate. Yet, he did not let this discourage him; he continued to produce campaign plans, distribute pamphlets and stick up posters for almost 10 years.¹

For many political activists, politics is like boxing: you get punched and hurt, but you keep coming back for more. Indeed, you experience the “anger and shame” that Paul Simon sings about every time you lose a battle. You might be tempted to give up, but you still sign up for the next fight because the drive to enter the ring over and over again is stronger. This passion stems, I believe, from the certainty that you know what is best for your country, locality or society, and because you want to be able to act on behalf of your fellow citizens. Politicians – at least for those for whom politics is a vocation – wish to take on the responsibility of finding solutions to collective problems, and thus have a great deal of confidence in their personal abilities.

This confidence notwithstanding, some people are more vulnerable than others in the boxing ring of politics. Women, the poorly educated, members of ethnic minorities and other minority groups have, for various reasons, greater difficulty in entering the political arena, getting elected, and generally pursuing their political careers. As outsiders, who are historically excluded from the political process, they can have problems in making the rules of the game their own. Indeed, being generally under-represented in parliaments and councils means that these people may be something of a lone voice on certain issues and are, therefore, unable to take a stand. The result of such a scenario is highlighted by numerous studies of political elites; elected assemblies are usually homogeneous and predominantly made-up of middle-aged white men who been educated to a high level.

However, despite a few exceptions, many of us believe that such homogeneously composed assemblies are a problem when it comes to the issue of representation (see

---

1. My mother’s timeless support is not irrelevant herein!
Pitkin, 1972, p.235). Even if the decisions taken by such assemblies may seem to be well-founded and reasonable, it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that what has been decided is not, in fact, well-informed, since a significant element of the population is excluded from deliberations, or the interests of a particular group of people are favoured above those of other less well exposed groups. From this point of view, the presence of women, ethnic minority candidates and the less well educated is necessary, because it ensures a better quality of deliberative process and the legitimacy of political decisions (Mansbridge, 1999).

Nevertheless, this descriptive representation (meaning that representatives are their own people and are in some sense typical of a larger class of people, Mansbridge, 1999, p.3; see also Pitkin, 1972, pp.60-91), does not only have advantages. When representatives can be assigned – on account of their gender, the colour of their skin, or the sound of their name – to minority groups within the population, the question of what being represented means and how this takes place also comes into play. Indeed, there is a potential tension; it seems as if the individual features of representatives, which are linked to a particular societal context, raise suspicions about the ability of politicians to strive for the common good. In Western European politics this is mainly the case for ethnic minority politicians, who are particularly vulnerable in this boxing ring because their visibility as “others” turns them into outsiders almost by definition, and leads to them being questioned about who and what they actually represent.

One example of this could be found when, in 2007, the Dutch parliament discussed the legitimacy and loyalty of two secretaries of state, Nebahat Albayrak and Ahmed Aboutaleb, because of their dual citizenship (see Stokman, 2007). Ultimately, the Islam-bashing party of Geert Wilders, the PVV, stood alone in its distrust of the abilities of these individuals to defend the interests of the Netherlands. What is interesting here is that the discussion did not concern their actual deeds, but their mere presence in an elected assembly. Although this example is not representative of the way in which ethnic minorities are included and dealt with in the Dutch political system – as this dissertation will show – it does illustrate how ethnic minority representatives have to face the suspicion that they will represent their country of origin or their ethnic group. Indeed, it appears that many of these representatives do experience such accusations at some point in their political career. Precisely because their origins, the colour of their skin, and the sound of their name are features they cannot escape, it is difficult for such individuals to avoid questions about the potential tension between their visible belonging to an ethnic group and the practice of representation. From this perspective, one might argue that ethnicity automatically plays a role in politics. However, we do not know if this is indeed always the case. Furthermore, it is not yet clear how individual features like one’s ethnic background have a part to play in politics, and, if they do, what this role actually is.

This study addresses these matters because it concerns the role of ethnicity in politics. I choose to consider this issue by focusing on three aspects of ethnic minority representation at the local level: access to local politics, the development of political careers and conceptions of the representation of ethnic minority councillors. These three elements cover the spectrum of elected politicians’ political careers and enable us to see how they themselves envisage their representation. These aspects of ethnic minority representation will be compared across two cities (Amsterdam and Paris) and over time (early 1990s versus 2007—2008). Above all, the question that this study seeks to answer is: how does ethnicity play a role in politics?

In the next section, a critical review of the existing knowledge of ethnic minority involvement in politics will further clarify why these three aspects of ethnic minority
representation (access, development of careers and conceptions of representation) are being studied here. The dual comparison (between Amsterdam and Paris and over time) has both theoretical and practical benefits, which I will subsequently detail in section II. I will then briefly present the design of this study and, finally, set out the subject-matter of the following chapters.

I. Existing knowledge of the presence of ethnic minorities in (local) politics

The first accounts of ethnic politics and minority political participation are to be found in the United States. The combination of early mass immigration (compared to Western Europe), relatively easy access to citizenship, the constituency-based electoral system (in combination with high levels of segregation), and specific party strategies provided a setting in which ethnic groups could form a political force at the end of the 19th century. In his famous study of the politics of New Haven, Dahl analysed the emergence of “ethnic politics” in terms of numbers; more ethnic group members equals more political participation. He also linked the success of ethnicity as a key political factor in the local politics of New Haven to the first phase of integration, which was characterised by the social, economic and cultural homogeneity of the ethnic group and the rise of ethnic sub-leaders (Dahl, 1961, p.34). This account of ethnic politics (as well as other early works, see e.g. Anwar, 1986, for the United Kingdom) presents the political incorporation of members of ethnic minority groups as a fairly smooth process. Although the groups discussed did encounter discrimination, barriers to political participation were overcome by both a strong sense of community and the significant size of these groups.

More recent studies largely refute the notion that political integration is an easy process, and also oppose the almost mechanical view in which the numbers of immigrants, or ethnic minorities, and political recognition are linked. In fact the opposite is true; while the sizes of immigrant groups have increased substantially in most countries and in many urban centres, scholars both highlight that immigrants tend to take part in elections less than the average participation rates (Togeby et al., 2010) and also point to the consistent lack of a presence of ethnic minority representatives in elected bodies (Alba & Foner, 2009; Bloemraad, 2010). Nevertheless, these general conclusions conceal a variety of circumstances, since the participation of ethnic minorities in political processes varies greatly from one country to another and from one city to another (see e.g. Garbaye, 2005). From this point of view, the Netherlands and France present two extreme situations; while the proportional representation of ethnic minorities is achieved in the Dutch parliament, there are hardly any ethnic minority MPs in the French Assemblée Nationale (Groenendijk et al., 2010; Keslassy, 2009). Differences are less pronounced at the local level, but, as the present study will show, many more ethnic minority councillors are elected in Amsterdam than in Paris.

Studies of immigrant and ethnic minority political participation are often country-specific, tending to focus on the local level. They are also frequently concerned with one particular ethnic or immigrant group (Bird, 2005, p.426). Most of this work concentrates on the (lack of) presence of immigrant and ethnic minority representatives (see Rath, 1985 for the Netherlands; Anwar, 2001 for the United Kingdom; Black, 2002 for Canada, etc.). In other words, it centres on the lack of descriptive representation and its determinants.
These determinants are sought in the realm of the institutional settings of countries and cities, particularly the electoral system and, in the Western European context, the workings of political parties (Togeby, 2008; Bloemraad, 2008; Berger et al., 2001). Despite the richness of these descriptive and, usually, explorative studies, they typically raise many questions and provide contextual explanations of a given situation that are difficult to transpose onto other scenarios. Comparative studies, the number of which have recently increased, are currently favoured, as they seem to be more valuable when it comes to helping us understand: what makes a polity open to newcomers; what has enhanced ethnic minority representation; and how we should comprehend the position of ethnic minority politicians more generally (Alba & Foner, 2009; Bird, 2005; Bloemraad, 2006; Garbaye, 2005; Kittilson & Tate, 2004; etc.). Again, the role of institutional factors and policies is highlighted in these comparative studies in order to explain the differences in terms of the immigrant and minority presence in, and thus the access to, elected bodies.

This focus on institutional differences stems from the rejection of other explanations. On the basis of a comparison of the political participation of immigrants in France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and Switzerland, Ireland concluded that different ethnic groups in the same country display more similar patterns of political participation than the same ethnic group across different countries (Ireland, 1994, p.10; pp.245-247; Ireland, 2000, p.270). Likewise, the vast majority of scholars in this field appear to reject culturalist (meaning that ethnicity or race would explain differences in patterns of political participation) and class-based explanations (for which participation is explained by the class structure and the common class identity of ethnic minorities). Among the institutional factors generally considered, some are directly related to the position of immigrants in a host society (access to legal rights, in particular the access to citizenship, the accommodation of cultural and religious practices, integration policies, etc.), while others are of a more general nature (electoral rules and party systems especially). More specifically, the importance of the local institutional setting is highlighted by several authors: the framework set by the national context is certainly relevant, but must be complemented with a study of the local idiosyncratic factors (Boussetta, 2001; Garbaye, 2005).

In the present study, I also wish to focus on the local level, thereby acknowledging that the connection between ethnicity and political participation is particularly salient at this level. Indeed, it is in cities that the concentration of the immigrant populations makes the rise of the claims linked to (political) integration probable and relevant (Garbaye, 2005, p.2). Moreover, it is at the local level that those belonging to ethnic minorities are present in councils in high numbers. A comparison of the incidence of ethnic minority politicians in the French and Dutch parliaments is interesting from a theoretical point of view, but would be significantly limited by the fact that (since 2007) only four of the 555 MPs elected in metropolitan France are of non-Western origin.3

There is a further reason for focusing on the local level: while national political elites have been studied in depth over time and across countries (Norris, 1997; Putnam, 1976), very few scholars have considered local political elites (noticeable exceptions are, e.g. Eldersveld et al., 1995; Rupp et al., 2004). The lack of attention paid to local politicians is, in my opinion, strange and unfair. These representatives are usually the first, and often

2. This conclusion was influenced by Bousseta’s work (2001) on the mobilisation of Moroccans across four cities in three different countries (Lille, Liège, Antwerpen and Utrecht); he demonstrates that these forms of political mobilisation are very similar across the cities, despite their heterogeneity in terms of policies and institutional arrangements (id., p.363).

3. These MPs were born in a non-Western country, or in the French Antilles, or have at least one parent from a non-Western country, the descendents of the “colons” – colonial settlers – apart.
the only, politicians that most people ever get in touch with. They, thus, play a crucial role in the democratic processes of our societies. Furthermore, processes of decentralisation, in both France and the Netherlands, have created a clear and significant domain of action for local executives. The decisions of local politicians, therefore, have a real impact on people's lives. So, why do we know so little about them? Although this study concerns a limited and unrepresentative sample of local political elites, it does contribute to an empirical and theoretical examination of how they work.

The functioning of political parties as a key element of the institutional setting in Western European countries is an additional and important insight contained in the existing literature. Indeed, ethnic minority politicians depend almost exclusively on existing (mainstream) parties for their access to politics (Berger et al., 2001, pp.60-61; Geisser, 1997, pp.235-238, see also Garbaye, 2005; Norris & Lovenduski, 1995). Ethnic or religious-based parties appear to be exceptional, neighbourhood associations, which engage in the political battle, but are usually unsuccessful (Berger et al., 2001, pp.60-61; Garbaye, 2005, p.164-169; 206-208). Accordingly, the road to a political mandate starts with an affiliation to a mainstream political party. Often included in the set of institutional factors in comparative research, the workings and strategies of political parties (and their leaders) have been examined more closely in case-studies. The rules governing the selection of candidates, and the choices made by selectorates vis-à-vis newcomers, and ethnic minorities in particular, have only rarely been scrutinised. I will, thus, include the study of the workings of local party systems and party sections in this work.

That being said, there are a number of flaws in the commonly followed institutionalist line of reasoning. Indeed, it is my view that the institutional setting, which characterises a given context in which ethnic minorities participate in politics, must be fully understood. Differences in electoral and political systems clearly have an impact on patterns of political participation and, as I will demonstrate in Chapter III, there are striking differences between Amsterdam and Paris. However, as explained above, I do not wish to limit my analyses of the role of ethnicity in terms of access to politics, the development of political careers, and discourses on representation to only the assessment of the institutional setting. Indeed, my contention is that institutional factors cannot fully account for a number of phenomena. One example is the differences that can be observed between ethnic groups in the same city in terms of their access to and participation in politics (see e.g. Berger et al. 2001; Garbaye, 2005). Indeed, after the 2006 municipal elections in the Netherlands, half of all of the councillors of foreign origin were of Turkish descent, while in the country's overall population there are as many Moroccans as Turks (Dekker & Fattah, 2006). Another phenomenon that the institutionalist approach cannot explain is the fact that despite different institutional settings, similar practices are often found on the ground (the overall lack of proportional representation is one, but this study will provide more examples of such similarities). A comparative study of two countries, which differ on a number of electoral, political or other features, usually reveals differences in the practices of individuals or groups. However, this does not necessarily mean that the only factor explaining the variation in practices on the ground is to be found in the differences in context. Other factors may be disregarded if one focuses on the structural differences between two countries, or, indeed, cities for that matter.

One of the factors that is regularly disregarded pertains to the role of people's experiences in their home country. The characteristics of an immigrant's home nation frame their political socialisation and thus affect the range of opportunities for political

4. Dutch scholars have highlighted that the selection committees which choose candidates include only a few immigrant party members (or women). Furthermore, it seems as if the traditional recruitment procedures are biased towards the recruitment of native male party members (Leijenaar, 1999; Berger et al., 2001).
action that are open to them. Garbaye states that people who migrate from countries with democratic traditions bring participatory habits with them (Garbaye, 2004, p.43). Experiences in the home country can also orientate people's political choices, as Bloemraad notes about the Republican loyalty of Vietnamese refugees in Boston (because the party is perceived as being anti-communist), even if this clashes with their preferences based on their socio-economic status (Bloemraad, 2006, p.215-217). The issue of homeland experiences and socialisation in the country of origin will, therefore, be taken into account in the present study.

More generally, I believe that because of the dominance of the institutionalist approach, too little attention has been paid to individual choices and strategies. I will argue in the next chapter that the clues to the participation of ethnic minorities in local politics not only reside in the framing role of local institutional settings, but also in the ways in which individuals make these frameworks their own, and ensure that their actions enrich them. This perspective provides the opportunity to look into the differences in access to politics and the development of political careers within one country, within ethnic groups and across individuals.

This brings me to another flaw in the existing literature. The knowledge we have of ethnic minority representatives is largely limited to the issue of their presence in politics. However, the questions asked in most cases (how many representatives are there, why do differences between countries and between cities exist?) mainly focus on the access of members of ethnic minority groups to politics, and only rarely to other aspects of their political careers and their functioning as representatives. Indeed, the literature on political elites does not usually take these matters into account at all. There is, however, more to the issue of the political incorporation of ethnic minorities than the question of access. Accordingly, and on the basis of longitudinal data, in addition to dealing with this factor in terms of the situations in Amsterdam (over time) and Paris, I will also describe the development of the careers of these politicians and address the question of their exit from politics.

By studying individual strategies and choices, I also wish to challenge a conclusion reached by many scholars, namely that in politics ethnicity and migration are more of a handicap than a resource. Indeed, ethnic minorities are generally under-represented in politics (Alba & Foner, 2009; Bloemraad, 2010). Moreover, they often feel that they are treated differently or even discriminated against (Simard, 2003; Berger et al. 2001; Geisser & Soum, 2008). It may seem natural that people who have to learn the language of their host country also learn about its political system, acquire its nationality in some cases (so far as immigrants are concerned), and find it more difficult to gain access to politics than their native counterparts. Nevertheless, the distinction must be made between the handicap of being an outsider on the one hand and discrimination on the other. Furthermore, there are some cases of proportional representation, most noticeably in the Netherlands (Michon, 2008), and the reasons why ethnicity is not a handicap in these circumstances must be clarified. In addition, some ethnic minority politicians use their ethnic background strategically (Bird, 2005, p.431), relying explicitly on their specific position as an exception in a native-dominated political system, or on the fact that they have inside information about their community. On the other hand, others maintain a low “ethnic profile” in their political activities. These insights have rarely been discussed in an explicit comparative approach, and I, therefore, wish to see whether ethnicity is perceived as a resource or a handicap by the ethnic minority politicians themselves in different contexts, relying on what they tell me about their experiences.
II. Design of the study

This study focuses on the role of ethnicity in specific political activities (access to local politics, the development of political careers and discourses on representation) in two different contexts (the two cities of Amsterdam and Paris) and at two points in time (the early 1990s and 2006-2008). The design of the study has been partly driven by the data that was collected by Cadat in the early 1990s for his uncompleted dissertation on politicians with an immigrant background (whether from the overseas territories or foreign countries) in Amsterdam and the region of Paris. Cadat collected 23 interviews in Amsterdam in 1990 and 1994, along with 15 in the Paris region in 1992. This material is used and analysed here, and has, thus, orientated the present study in a number of ways. My work adopts a qualitative approach based on the detailed analysis of in-depth interviews, which was also the case in the study initiated by Cadat. This methodological approach is particularly suited to addressing the research question, as I will argue in Chapter II.

The comparison between Amsterdam and Paris is attractive for a number of reasons. They are contrasting cases, partly because of national factors, and partly because of local features. France and the Netherlands have very distinct traditions when it comes to: the incorporation of immigrants and the extension of rights to foreigners (Guiraudon, 2000, p.20; pp.32-44); the different conceptions of citizenship; and the divergent institutional frameworks for the political participation of minorities (Odmalm, 2005, p.130-131). Amsterdam and Paris are cities of a different size and status, and also diverge in terms of their electoral and political systems. The two cases are compared because of their differences, and the comparative method used in this study will highlight both the empirical variations (which are linked to each context), as well as the similarities in practices despite these differences.

Table 0.1: Data used in the present study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amsterdam</th>
<th>Parisian region/Paris</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time of interview</td>
<td>Data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990/1994</td>
<td>Interviews with (district) councillors (23)</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006/2007</td>
<td>Same respondents re-interviewed (16)</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Interviews with (district) councillors (15)</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time of interview</td>
<td>Data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Interviews with councillors in the region of Paris (15)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Same respondents re-interviewed (11)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007/2008</td>
<td>Interviews with (district) councillors in Paris (17)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Cadat’s work focused on the experiences of these politicians and, more particularly, the forms of discrimination that they faced.

6. I am grateful to Brieuc-Yves Cadat for making this material available for the present study.
The comparison contained in the data collected in the early 1990s is reinforced in my study. Multiple comparisons are conducted here: a comparison of the two cities, a comparison over time, and a comparison of the longitudinal data. The longitudinal dataset was constructed by complementing the 38 interviews conducted in the early 1990s with new interviews with these same respondents (27 of them were re-interviewed). In addition, interviews were also conducted with ethnic minority councillors in Amsterdam (15 interviews) and Paris (17 interviews) who were elected in the 2006 and 2008 elections respectively. Table 0.1 summarises what data has been collected, when and where.

Using this data, two types of comparisons will be made, as I explain in Chapter II. The comparison of the situation in Amsterdam over time (early 1990s vs. 2006-2008) resembles what Przeworski & Teune call a “most similar systems design” (1970) in which the context remains (largely) the same, but the focus is on the changes that occur over time. These changes highlight the role of contextual factors (idem, p.33) on the studied phenomenon (i.e. in the present study, the role of ethnicity in politics). In contrast, when comparing the situation in Amsterdam with that in Paris, a “most different systems design” is utilised (idem, p.34-35). While differences in outcome can be expected, it is particularly interesting to look at similarities. Such similarities, despite very different contexts (as I will explain in Chapter III), demonstrate that some mechanisms are not tied to a particular local context (idem, p.35). Both comparisons guide the analysis of the interaction between structural (or contextual) features and individual practices. They inform us about general mechanisms concerning this interaction, and help us to determine what transcends the contextual explanation of the role of ethnicity in politics. In other words, the ultimate aim of the multiple comparisons conducted in this study is to discover what the general mechanisms are of the role of ethnicity in politics.

A note must be added here about the terminology used in this study, particularly that concerning the reference to ethnic minorities. The discussion of the presence (and legitimacy) of minority representatives in Western European politics truly arose when immigrants began to enter the political arena. Indeed, many ethnic minority politicians have foreign origins, and most councillors interviewed within the framework of this study are immigrants or the children of immigrants. If the focus is on migration, one is, inevitably, dealing with people who were born and, eventually, socialised abroad. As touched upon above, it seems natural that immigrants need some time to find their way in the political arena of the country to which they have emigrated. But at what point does the “natural” learning process end? In fact, I will demonstrate that the migration process does not, in itself, explain how people get access to politics, how their careers develop and how they think about representation. Indeed, a focus on migration only conceals the fact that other groups may also be perceived as outsiders: second or third generation immigrants, national minorities, people from overseas territories, etc. More particularly, studies of this last group reveal that this position as outsider is crucial to understanding the pattern of political participation (Maxwell, 2008). I, therefore, adopt a broader perspective than that of migration, and instead use the terminology of “ethnic minorities.” In doing so, I rely on Weber’s definition of ethnic groups:

We shall call ‘ethnic groups’ those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration; this belief must be important for the propagation of groups formation; conversely, it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists. (Weber, 1978, p.389)
This definition highlights that ethnicity is primarily a social construction: it is a shared belief in a common identity. Weber’s definition specifically centres on the group process. Accordingly, it is useful for the exploration of the relationship that an individual maintains with an ethnic group identity. This will be at stake in the present study, instead of the focus being on group processes. Furthermore, as Weber’s definition of ethnicity helps us to realise that the term is a social construction, it raises the question of who constructs this “brotherhood on the basis of the belief in common ethnicity” (idem). Individuals within an ethnic group may claim this common identity, but outsiders may be just as likely to participate in its creation. One should, therefore, wonder about the extent to which individuals are perceived as belonging to an ethnic group by members of an ethnic group or outsiders. In this study, the perceptions that the ethnic minority councillors encounter from party members, colleagues and the electorate are, therefore, scrutinised.

More practical reasons have also led me to choose to refer to “ethnic minorities.” These are linked to the use of the data collected in the early 1990s and the comparison between Amsterdam and Paris. A term had to be found that would fit the group of respondents interviewed in the early 1990s and would also be acceptable in both countries. Politicians born in Surinam, the Antilles, Turkey, Morocco, Algeria or Tunisia, or with at least one parent born there, had been interviewed in the early 90s. Intuitively, it is understandable why these people were singled out among the politicians in Amsterdam and the Parisian region: they are non-white; may be discriminated against because of the colour of their skin, their name and/or their religion; they have a different cultural background; they have a history of migration; and they belong to minority groups, etc. However, the terminology used to refer to these groups in each context differs substantially. In the Netherlands, the terms “migranten” or “allochtonen” are used to designate politicians (or more generally people) with a foreign background, referring to people of non-Western origins, including Antilleans. Nationality does not, however, play an important role in the definition of this population, as foreigners have political rights at the local level. In France, politicians of foreign descent are described as “élus d’origine immigrée” (or: “hommes/femmes politiques d’origine immigrée”), or, more recently, as “élus (issus) de la diversité” (Geisser & Soum, 2008), referring mainly to those of North-African and Sub-Saharan African origins. They are, by definition, French, since non-nationals do not have political rights in France, but the chosen terminology (“origins” and “diversity”), which is rather vague, can be extended to include the descendants of many generations of migration, as well as French citizens from the overseas territories (“Domiens”, “ultra-maris” or “Antillais”). In order to be able to include people of different categories of migration (first and second generation), legal status (citizens and foreigners), ethnicity, origins, etc., the term that seems most appropriate is that of “ethnic minority.” It is not particularly linked to either the Dutch or the French context, but makes clear which population is under study, and, in particular, makes it possible to include Antilleans – who by their legal status and historical background are not immigrants.

7. The Dutch Antilles are part of the Dutch Kingdom (with a special status); Antilleans thus have Dutch nationality. In the mainstream discourse and the official statistics, however, they are regarded as non-Western “allochthones.”
III. Plan of the dissertation

The final part of this introduction serves to describe the chapters that follow. The next chapter, which sets out the theoretical framework of the research, focuses on two perspectives: the study of institutions and the analysis of practices. In this theoretical chapter, I also operationalise the concept of practices and explain how the issues of access to politics, the development of careers and discourses on representation can be understood from a theoretical point of view. The issue of the role of ethnicity runs through this theoretical framework as its common thread, and is linked to the different issues that are addressed.

The second chapter concerns the methodological choices and research design of the study. I explain how the use of data that was collected earlier has influenced the design of this research, both in terms of the choice of the setting and the research population and the opportunities for comparison. The comparative method and linked research design are then detailed. Two types of comparison are conducted here: the comparison of the situation in Amsterdam over time (early 1990s vs. 2006-2008) and the comparison between Amsterdam and Paris. The implications of the use of both comparative methods are discussed. Then, the final section of the methodological chapter concerns the process of data gathering, in particular sampling, data collection and the analysis of the in-depth interviews that have been conducted.

The description of the structural features of the contexts – Amsterdam, Paris and the Parisian region – is the subject of Chapter III, which is concerned with the elements of the structure that affect the practices of ethnic minority politicians. The characteristics of the electoral system, the local organisation of power, the local party systems and party cultures are described for each case. Furthermore, I also focus on the ethnic minority presence in the population and the mechanisms of its political incorporation.

Chapters IV, V and VI concern the analysis of practices. Chapter IV details the process of access to politics in Amsterdam in the early 1990s and 2006 and in Paris in 2008. The sociological profile of the ethnic minority politicians elected in the two cities and over time is described both for the total population and, in more detail, for the groups of respondents who have been interviewed. Furthermore, the (political or civil) activities of the respondents before their election are also examined, so as to aid our understanding of what is needed to gain access to the local political arena. After the description of each case, I will look into the differences and similarities across both time and the two cities, and will contrast the results concerning the practices with the elements of the structure described earlier.

In Chapter V, longitudinal data are used in order to study the development of the careers of the ethnic minority politicians who were elected in the early 1990s in both Amsterdam and the Parisian region and were interviewed at that time. As a large majority of these individuals were re-interviewed recently, this chapter reveals striking differences between the two cases. Different understandings of what a political career is seem to be at play and these can be linked to the elements of the structural features of the context in which the politicians evolve.

The final empirical chapter, Chapter VI, analyses the discourses of the ethnic minority politicians, both over time and across cities. Grounded coding was used to consider the respondents’ conceptions of representation by asking who or what it is that they wish to represent. Furthermore, the activity of representation (i.e. what representation consists of) has also been analysed. This chapter thus provides an empirical understanding of
representation across time and space, and also reveals important similarities in the discourse of the representatives.

The concluding chapter of this dissertation summarises the most important findings and focuses on two transversal questions: the interplay between structure and practices, and the role of ethnicity, which is the central issue in this work. I argue that however useful and necessary, the prevailing approach, which is centred on national and local institutional arrangements, cannot account for the important mechanisms of the incorporation of ethnic minorities in politics. Indeed, it has been largely overlooked that the recruitment of ethnic minority politicians and their role as representative depend more on the functioning of political elites and the workings of representative democracies than on particular institutional arrangements. The extent to which ethnicity plays a role in politics does not depend upon on local and national arrangements either: both in Amsterdam and Paris, and across time, its role is generally circumscribed.