Ethnic minorities in local politics: comparing Amsterdam and Paris

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Chapter V

The Development of Political Careers

This chapter is based on longitudinal data, namely interviews conducted with the same ethnic minority councillors in both the early 1990s and more recently. It partly builds on the previous chapter, since the 23 interviews conducted in 1990 and 2004 are utilised again. However, another group of respondents is introduced here: the 15 ethnic minority councillors elected in the Paris region at the beginning of the 1990s. A large majority of both groups of respondents were re-interviewed in 2006 and 2007 (respectively 16 and 11 individuals). This longitudinal data makes it possible to study the development of careers. As explained in Chapter II, I will use information about the type of mandates and party positions held, the length of political careers, and the aspirations of politicians to reflect on Weber’s typology: politics by vocation or avocation (Weber, 1946 [1921], p.83). Furthermore, the relationship between the politicians and their party, and the extent to which they depend on their party for the development of their political careers, are discussed here. Finally, the aim of this chapter is to study the issue of leaving politics in terms of when, how and why it occurs, since this is a lacuna in the current research on ethnic minorities in politics.

As a new group of interviewees is being introduced here, I will begin with a brief overview of the profile of those interviewed in 1992 in the Paris region. I will then describe the development of their political careers. In the following section, this same issue is considered in terms of those elected in the 1990s in Amsterdam. In the final section, the careers of the ethnic minority politicians in both contexts are compared and linked to the conclusions of Chapter IV on the structural features of the two contexts.
I. Political careers of ethnic minority politicians in the Parisian region

a. Profile of the respondents

Fifteen politicians were interviewed in 1992 in the Paris region. These individuals had been born abroad or in the Antilles, or at least one of their parents had been. Two were elected in Paris, and 13 others in surrounding municipalities.¹ The respondents had been elected to a local council at the time of the interviews, save for one who had been deputy mayor in a district of Paris between 1980 and 1983, and had been elected to the regional council in 1986 and 1992 (two mandates). He is included in the sample because of these political mandates and because he belonged to a right-wing party.

The group was comprised of two women and 13 men. Six were born in the Antilles, eight are of Algerian origin, two have an Algerian father and a French mother, and one respondent is of Moroccan descent. Five of the politicians were born in France, and all are of North African origin. In contrast, 10 other respondents had migrated to the country. Three were young children when they did so, while seven came to metropolitan France as young adults, when aged between 17 and 35, either to study or work. In one case, the respondent came to France following the declaration of independence in Algeria (in 1962). He and his family were so called “rapatriés”, namely French and Algerian families who were brought “back” to France (although some had never lived there).

The youngest respondent was aged 26 while the eldest was 51. The average age of the 15 respondents was 41. The six who came from the Antilles were slightly older (average: 46 years) than those of North African origin (average age: 37). The average age for the second generation immigrants among the respondents was lower than for the group as a whole (33 years of age).

Most respondents had a modest background: eight were working class, while the other seven had had a lower middle-class or middle-class upbringing because their father (and for two respondents also their mother) had been undertaking qualified work in their country or region of origin. The respondents themselves were predominantly middle-class. Eleven have a higher education diploma in the fields of informatics, economics, political science, law, sociology, or geography, while four had undertaken vocational training, either in the medical sector (three respondents) or as an electrician (one respondent).²

Nationality and citizenship are intimately linked in France: in order to have the right to be elected, all of the respondents had to have French nationality. Nine individuals were born French: either they were born in France (six Antillean respondents and two second generation immigrants), or Algeria before independence. Six respondents were born foreigners and later acquired French nationality.

¹ Ten respondents were elected in the municipalities of the “petite couronne” (close suburbs of Paris), including seven in the Seine-Saint-Denis “department.” Three respondents were elected in remote suburban municipalities.

² The new series of interviews in 2007 revealed that there were no changes in their educational status, but due to the selection process, the level of education was slightly higher than for the original group of 15 respondents, with only two who had just undertaken vocational training. Two respondents have retired since the 1992 interviews.
Chapter V - The Development of Political Careers

Table 5.1 summarises the different elements of the profile of the respondents, and reveals that while the group seems to be rather heterogeneous (in terms of origins, age, background and history of migration), relatively young and highly educated men are in the majority.

The way in which these politicians gained access to politics is not at the heart of this chapter. It is, however, helpful to bear in mind when and how they became involved in this arena if we are to reflect on the development of the political careers of these individuals. Accordingly, the key features of the process of gaining access to politics for the 15 respondents considered in this chapter are, thus, summarised briefly. Most stated that their parents had engaged in few or no political activities. Only two mentioned that their father was a member of a political party (one the Communist party in the Antilles, the other the Gaullist party in Algeria and subsequently in France). Six of the eight respondents of Algerian origin claimed that their father supported the FLN (“Front de Libération Nationale”) during the Algerian war of independence. The respondents did not, however, believe that their fathers were high profile activists; they mainly collected money.\(^3\)

**Table 5.1: Profile of the respondents in the region of Paris**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
<th>15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>2 women, 13 men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age in 1992</td>
<td>Range: 26-51 average: 41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origins (based on country of birth, and country of birth of parents)</td>
<td>6 Antillean, 8 Algerian (2 of them French-Algerian) 1 Moroccan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background (based on profession of parents)</td>
<td>8 working-class 7 middle-class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of migration</td>
<td>4 born abroad; 6 in Antilles 7 migrated as adults; 3 as young children. 5 born in ‘Métropole’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason for migration (10 respondents)</td>
<td>6 Study/qualified work 1 because of Algerian independence 3 family migration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>11 higher education 4 vocational training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality and naturalisation</td>
<td>All hold French nationality 9 by birth 6 naturalised</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Engagement in political activities was, therefore, primarily based upon the respondents taking the initiative themselves. Moreover, their political engagement was, and still is, fully linked to France and took place within French political parties. Seven respondents were members of the Socialist party in 1992 and three were members of the Communist

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3. The father of one respondent was, however, sent to prison because of his activities.
party. One respondent was a member of Génération Ecologie, an environmentalist party founded in 1990, one belonged to a right-wing party, the RPR, and finally, one individual, after being a member of the Socialist party for nine years, was now a member of a small, rather marginal, party, the “Mouvement pour une Nouvelle Humanité” (MNH), which is mainly led by Antilleans. Two respondents were not a party member at the time of interview, and never had been; these individuals had been elected on a list as civil society members, and it was a conscious and voluntary choice to engage in politics without belonging to a party.

The 13 respondents who were members of a party had been long-term party members at the time of their first election (in 1977 for one, 1980 for another, 1983 for four, or 1989 for the rest): eight had been a party member for four years or more, one individual had been a member of Gaullist parties for 27 years, while, in contrast, two respondents had joined their party shortly before the elections and were both members of newly founded parties (“Génération Ecologie” and the MNH). A large majority of the respondents explained that the length of their party membership legitimised their candidacy. The general feeling was that it is not only obvious that one should be elected after some years of activism, but even that the process should not operate otherwise. Those who were not party members stressed that they had had contacts who were local politicians for many years, and it was these individuals who had eventually invited them to join the electoral list. Accordingly, it seems that apart from long-term party membership, local civic engagement was recognised by local party leaders as a source of political legitimacy.

It appears from the interviews that the Socialist party issued a guideline during the 1989 campaign, encouraging local branches to include candidates of foreign origin on the electoral lists, and in two interviews the role of this directive was referred to. The guideline was, however, by no means an adequate reason for inclusion on the electoral lists. Indeed, the respondents underlined the fact that they were also active and recognised members of the party and/or the local section. In other words, they tended to explain their access mainly by referring to their longstanding and active party membership, and not to the fact that they might have been chosen because of the party directive.

b. The development of careers

Eleven of the 15 respondents from 1992 were re-interviewed in 2007 and 2008. Six were still members of the party they represented in 1992. Four other individuals were no longer party members, two had never been and two others had left their party (for both, the Communist party, after 18 and 20 years of membership). Finally, one respondent had changed parties: he had been a member of Génération Ecologie in 1992, joined the

4. Génération Ecologie was particularly successful in 1992. It brought together centre-left and centre-right environmental activists, but has subsequently moved closer to the right-wing parties. It has not been very successful politically since 1993.
5. In French: “personnalité d’ouverture”, or “issu de la société civile.”
6. This equated to 42 years of activism for one respondent. Another respondent left the party he was elected for, joined another party for which he was a candidate, and then rejoined the first party again.
7. One of them, however, had explicitly said in 1992 that he was a member of the Communist Party. In 2007, he explained that he had never been a member of that party, but that he had been a supporter.
Gaullist party, the RPR, in 1997, and was now member of its successor, the UMP.

Five of the 11 respondents who were re-interviewed still held an electoral mandate. One became an MP during the parliamentary elections of June 2007, after a gap of nine years, which was due to the fact that she had held a position (in a public agency) that was incompatible with a political mandate. She had tried to get elected in 2001, but was not selected as a candidate by her party. A new opportunity arose for this individual with the parliamentary elections of 2007, partly because of the growing attention paid to the absence of visible minorities in French politics after the "banlieues" riots in 2005. This respondent stressed that it was on her own initiative that she joined the electoral battle again in this particular context:

Of course, I was still interested in politics... I have worked in the Parisian municipal administration since 2001, and I continued to follow things closely. And at some point... there were social movements, the riots in the "banlieues" and I thought it might be good to... to get involved again. I wanted to give a signal to some, in particular to young people... they seemed to me to be very disappointed about their French citizenship. (...) I thought that I needed to show that we all really are equal in rights.

Four respondents were elected to municipal councils,\(^8\) three of whom had not lost their seat since 1989, or even 1983 (one had been a councillor in his municipality for 24 years). One respondent was elected to a municipal council between 1989 and 1995, then moved to another municipality and was elected in 2001 to a district council in Paris.

Among the six respondents who left politics, three no longer have a political mandate because of a conflict, and three did not want to be re-elected. One interviewee, an Antillean, continued in office for two mandates (12 years) on the municipal council of his area. However, during the campaign for the 2001 municipal elections, he came into conflict with the mayor - he believed that too little was being promised to Antillean inhabitants - and withdrew from the list.

I was in 6th position on the list. After the first round, I withdrew. I asked for a number of things for people from the overseas territories: a judicial office, a welfare worker, and they could not comply with these demands, because the city had debts. There was no need to fool my compatriots, so I withdrew.

Another respondent was not included on the list for the regional elections in 1998. He had been a regional councillor between 1986 and 1998 (two mandates), and before then he had been the deputy mayor in a district of Paris. He had argued with party leaders about various issues, one of which was his alleged (unfairly according to him) communitarian approach. This respondent is still a member of the right-wing party, but is very critical of it and its leaders.

A third respondent had also lost his seat. He had been a member of the Socialist party between 1980 and 1995, and had held a seat in a municipal council between 1983 and 1995. In 1995, he decided that he wanted to become deputy mayor, but the mayor

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\(^8\) There were some changes after the 2008 municipal elections: two of the re-interviewed respondents kept their local mandate, while two had stepped down. Another respondent had been out of office for a few years and was elected to a municipal council. Finally, the respondent who had been elected as an MP in 2007 now combines this position with that of district councillor in Paris.
refused his request. He then joined a small centre-left party to oppose the mayor. He did, however, rejoin the Socialist party in 2006 to prepare for the 2008 municipal elections.\footnote{He did, however, leave that party at the end of 2007 to join the new centre party, Modem.}

Three respondents did not refer to any conflict when explaining why they left local politics; instead, a form of lassitude played a role, although many different factors were, in fact, at play: two moved to other municipalities and could not, therefore, be re-elected. None of these respondents intends to seek re-election in the future.

When asked to reflect upon their careers, three respondents gave positive responses about their situation and achievements. All three are currently in office; two have remained on their municipal council for many years, and one has recently become an MP. All three are members of the Socialist party. Their satisfaction relates to a number of different matters; they were happy about the policies of their municipality and what they had achieved personally. One individual, who has a vocational qualification, explained that his political experience (18 years on his city’s municipal council, of which seven were spent as deputy mayor) was more valuable to him than any higher education degree. A sense of pride and social revenge is expressed here:

Even if I had gone to university, I probably would have learned less than I have here... When I meet new people, whatever the topic of the conversation, I may not always have an opinion, but I know what we are talking about. (...) I am well-informed and I know the ins and outs... And that, I learned in politics, whether you like it or not. In a way, it was the university I could not go to, and I feel proud that I got this training without going to university.

These three respondents rejected the often-heard criticism that their party did not do enough for migrants and visible minorities. To them, people have to make an individual effort to obtain a political position. The reaction of one respondent was illustrative of this when she was asked why some criticise the Socialist party for not doing enough to get ethnic minorities elected:

Well, some people ask what the PS [Parti Socialiste, LM] does for them, but they should also ask themselves what they do for the PS. Do they... It is a competitive arena. You have to put a lot of yourself into the party, you have to write, you have to do things, so as to... so as to give the impression that you can be useful to the group.

In contrast, there was a group of six disappointed respondents. Two are members of the Socialist party, two belong to the right-wing UMP and two have left the Communist party. Two of these individuals hold an elected position, and their disappointment mainly stems from the fact that after 20 years of activism, they believe that they have not had the recognition they deserve. As one said: “there cannot be any justification for being relegated to nothing at all at the age of 50.” The other respondent explained that his position can be quite demotivating to young people who might be interested in engaging in politics:

I cannot be a role-model; I am just a municipal councillor, and that after 20 years of political engagement. That really isn’t a good example to others. They will think: why have a hell of a bad time for 20 years and end up as a dogsbody...
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So, why accept such a position if it is seen as downgrading after 20 years of political engagement? This same respondent believes that in order to pursue a political career, a minor position (which is what the role of district councillor is to him) is better than no position at all:

I accepted to be the last on the electoral list, I accepted this humiliation because I believe that... nothing is easy. You don't get a position just like that. You have to accept being humiliated. That is difficult. I have shown that... that I was able to keep my feelings to myself. I did not say: I quit. I accepted to be the last on the list. (...) Luckily, we got a very high score, and I was elected. Otherwise I would have been politically dead.

Really?
Well, yes, I wouldn't have had any political position. I could have disappeared from the political arena.

But through other means, within your party for example...
Yes, but it is much better to have a mandate. Even a minor position, but you need to have a mandate.

Four other critical respondents no longer hold an elected position. Three left after an argument with the party (one is a member of the UMP, one the PS and the other had been a member of the Communist party), while one did not want to stand in an election again. Both the lack of opportunities to advance their careers, their irritation about the rules of the political game and disappointment about policy achievements explain their criticisms.

Finally, two individuals had mixed feelings when they evaluated their political careers, expressing some disappointment, but also evoking positive experiences. Their reasons for their satisfaction and disappointment were similar to those of the more outspoken respondents.

**c. The role of ethnicity**

From the interviews in 2007, it appears that the origins of the respondents primarily played a role in their political activities and careers as an ascribed identity that was used by others, noticeably the party and some political opponents.

Starting with the most extreme situations, two respondents explained that they had been on the receiving end of explicit racist remarks. It is interesting to note that in both cases this occurred when they stood in an election for a role at a higher level in the hierarchy of the French political system. One headed a party list for the regional elections of 1992, while the other was a candidate for a seat in parliament. Both are Antilleans. The first was harassed with anonymous phone calls:

When I stood in the election for the regional council... my wife could not sleep at home at night. Every night we got phone calls... "nigger, we are going to burn your house down, we are going to kill you!"... These must have been extreme-right people. And... that made me quit politics as well. At night we had to take the phone off the hook.

10. These respondents admitted that their conflicts were essentially linked to their personality, as their strong temperament had led to clashes with party leaders.
This respondent explained that he had not expected such attacks because of his political activities and they were more than he could endure. Indeed, this experience was one of the reasons he left the political arena.

The other respondent was accused by her opponent of being a “communitarian candidate” (i.e. a politician who only cares about the interests of his/her ethnic community), which is an insult in the French political context. Despite having stood in many elections previously, this interviewee had never before been confronted with such statements:

My main opponent (...) was always saying that mine was a communitarian candidacy. But I always defended universal issues. But for him, as I was born in an outermost region, my candidacy could only express something like folklore. (...) He really insisted on that and it was quite annoying!

**Were you accused of this for the first time?**

Yes. Like this, yes. I have often taken care of issues of immigration, racism etc., but never had anyone put the emphasis on my origins like that.

This respondent felt motivated to show her opponent how wrong he was. It also put an emphasis on the symbolic element of her candidacy, which she happily assumed.

A very different type of identity ascription was mentioned by two other respondents, and is linked to a particular party. These interviewees believed that the Socialist party has something against people of Algerian descent, and felt that this had been an obstacle to the advancement of their political career. One respondent, who is a member of the PS, was a deputy mayor for 15 years and was subsequently on the municipal council in his area. He did not believe that he could attain a higher level in politics, because of prejudices against Algerians:

**Do you think about standing for another election in the near future?**

Well... I think that it is impossible. I think that within the Socialist party, it is impossible.

**Why?**

Because I think that there is a form of deeply imbedded racism within the party. I truly believe that.

**Because of your origins?**

I think so, yes. I wouldn’t have said that some years ago. (...) After 24 years of engagement, and many years of support for the socialists, I came to the conclusion that it is impossible. Impossible. For those of Algerian origin. People from other origins are not problematic. Those of African, Moroccan, Tunisian origin. But for those of Algerian origin, it’s impossible. You have to realise that the Algerian war is not over yet in France. It left terrible scars behind, absolutely terrible scars, within the Socialist party just like everywhere else, but maybe even more within the Socialist party, among the leaders of the Socialist party, there is a profound hostility. Profound and intense.

Despite questions seeking further clarification with both this respondent and another who also touched upon this issue, it is not really clear why this prejudice against Algerians would be particularly strong within the Socialist party, in comparison to others. The respondents did not give examples of remarks or statements made by party members that would illustrate their (serious) accusations. It is, therefore, difficult to assess these claims. They are, however, interesting when compared to what was said by an Antillean
respondent, who is active within an all-party organisation of elected Antilleans, and who explained that this “ocuminal” engagement for his community is “a sacrifice of one’s career.” In these circumstances, we see here the idea of a strong hierarchy of political positions; it is all right to take care of your community’s interests as a municipal councillor, and to work with fellow Antilleans from other parties for that matter, but if you want to take on a more high-profile role (heading a list, or standing in a single-member district election), this will not be accepted by the party. These experiences of discrimination (accusations of “communitarism”, latent prejudice and explicit racist remarks) highlight that although the issue of origin is not an impediment to gaining access to politics, or to holding a local office, it can be an obstacle if an individual has wider ambitions.

Five respondents revealed their frustration at seeing other ethnic minority party members having responsible roles without displaying the same level of engagement and loyalty. There is a link here with what was said before; in the mind of these respondents, parties favour a high turn-over of ethnic minority politicians in order to ensure that they fill the less prestigious political positions. Co-opting people with little political and party background would thus be a strategy to “neutralise” long-time party members who deserve political recognition in the form of more high-profile roles. In the words of one of the interviewees:

Yes, I am terribly disappointed. Even more because they have rewarded others... that is awfully frustrating. They rewarded people from the North-African community who had previously told me to go to hell with “my Chirac” and “my Juppé” and “my Toubon”! Those are the ones who got promoted. One even got a position as advisor at the Elysée.11

There is, however, another dimension to this particular criticism levelled by the respondents. Four of them elaborated on the position of (migrant) women. To cite one of these interviewees, who is a member of the right-wing party, the UMP:

There shouldn’t be specificity for us. I have been a representative for a long time, so why have those who get a position in government never been elected? (...) Should people have no representative experience in order to get access to politics... as a token of innovation? We should be treated like everyone else. I have been a candidate, I have been active in politics for a long time... In the end, only women with a migrant background get access. (...) Parties kill two birds with one stone when they choose migrant women. But I think that it is very bad, as it conveys the idea that men with a migrant background are not legitimate. We should compete just like the others. We are always left out.

The respondent believes that male politicians with a foreign background (and, more particularly, those of North-African origin) cannot compete for senior positions in the French political system. They may get elected at the local level, but are not chosen by their parties for more high-profile roles.

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11. Jacques Chirac has been the leader of the Gaullist movement for many years, mayor of Paris, prime minister and president of the French Republic between 1995 and 2007. Alain Juppé was a close companion of Chirac both at the Parisian Town Hall and in government (his first prime minister). Jacques Toubon was also a close and loyal companion of Chirac, elected in Paris and holding various positions in government. The Elysée palace is the seat of the French president.
Ethnicity thus appears to be primarily something that the respondents are unwillingly labelled by. Nevertheless, a few explained how they could mobilise this issue themselves. Three interviewees described how they had fought inside their party to ensure the inclusion of ethnic minority candidates on the party lists. One of these individuals explained why and how she did this:

In 2004 [the regional elections], we had to fight hard, it was a tough battle in 2004, in order to have an Antillean elected...

In Ile-de-France [the region including Paris and the suburbs]?
In Ile-de-France, yes. And although... the regional council has 200 representatives. And in Ile-de-France, some places are very multicultural... A few people of foreign origin were included on the list, but nobody from the Antilles, while Antilleans have been French for much longer. And they are largely present here. So it was a tough battle.

A very different mechanism of ethnic mobilisation was revealed by another respondent; he began his political involvement being somewhat distant from the Antillean organisations within his municipality, but was, through his work as councillor, drawn to this community and ultimately became the president of an Antillean association.

I think that at some point, I realised that whatever I did, whether I wanted it or not, I am part of the Antillean community, notably in the eyes of other people. To put it differently: the others see me as member of a community, as a communitarian.

And by others, you mean Antilleans and “Métropolitains”?
No, I mean white people. White people. It is important to say white people. “Métropolitains” are not necessarily white.

This respondent thus turned an ascribed identity into an assumed and asserted identity, which was also meaningful for political purposes. He encouraged the Antillean inhabitants of his city to register as voters and become active in the political process. Indeed, the mobilisation of an ethnic identity for political purposes seemed to be particularly strong for the Antillean candidates. In fact, as we will see in the next chapter, this is also reflected in the discourses of these respondents.

The group of ethnic minority politicians interviewed in 1992 in the Paris region was very diverse in terms of origin, age, background, history of migration and level of education. They had also taken different paths to gain access to local politics. Their careers have been different as well; some continued to work locally, others moved onto other levels (or at least tried to), some stayed in office, and others left politics altogether. The stories behind the divergence of these various careers, and how the respondents assessed them, varied. Some were very satisfied about their experiences, while most were disappointed and frustrated.

When looking at the career development of these politicians, two types thereof emerge. For some respondents, political activities are attached to a local setting and their political careers are also local; they were elected to the municipal council for a period of time (which can be lengthy) and left the arena quite happily. For others, their political career is centred on a partisan engagement. Parties are at the core of what they do, their legitimacy as a representative stems from their party activism, and their political mandates are features of their political careers – along with their activities and
responsibilities within the party. The municipal mandate is often one of the elements of their political engagement – it may be a substantial part, but is rarely enough on its own. While a successful political career can be achieved through their good work for the municipality for the first group, this depends upon the advancement of their political career for the second. To these individuals, a political career is a ladder with the municipal mandate at the bottom, and a national mandate at the top. Climbing this ladder can, however, be difficult and is often frustrating. This dichotomy does not completely reflect the notion expressed by Weber that politics is either a vocation or an avocation (Weber, 1946 [1921], p.83). This is because we see elements of politics as a vocation in both cases. The discriminatory elements in the dichotomy revealed by the analysis of the careers of the French respondents seem to be the level of ambition and the attachment to (or dependence on) the party.

When looking at the part that ethnicity plays in the careers of the respondents, it did not seem to be crucial in terms of access. The subjects underlined that they were active party members and their candidacy naturally followed on from this. For those who are members of the Socialist party, the party guideline issued in 1989 may have helped them get access to politics, but cannot explain it. During their careers, ethnicity primarily played a role as an ascribed identity that was used against the respondents, especially for those who wanted to climb the career ladder of French politics. Having a more “communitarian” approach at the local level appears to be more acceptable than when higher positions are sought. This conclusion reflects the outcomes of Chapter III. The existence of a closed political system (due to different aspects of the electoral system and historical features), a strong hierarchy of positions, and party cultures that are not particularly open, led me to conclude that the access that newcomers have to the political arena is restrained rather than facilitated in the context of Paris and its regions. The interviews have helped us to realise that it is not access that is necessarily restrained for ethnic minority politicians, but more the opportunity to build an upwardly mobile political career.

Furthermore, the interviews highlighted that despite the important presence of immigrants, and particularly Antilleans, in most of the municipalities where the ethnic minority politicians studied herein were elected, ethnicity is usually not mobilised as a political resource by them. It is, and remains (over time), a burden much more than a blessing.

**II. Political careers of ethnic minority politicians in Amsterdam**

Of the 23 respondents interviewed in Amsterdam in 1990 and 1994, sixteen were re-interviewed between 2006 and 2008. The profile of those interviewed in the early 1990s, their access to politics and their discourses on representation have been presented in the previous chapter, and will, therefore, not be repeated here. We have seen that this group of respondents is characterised by heterogeneity in terms of origins and social-economic background, and by homogeneity in terms of gender (with few women), education (with a generally high level of education), history of migration (all were born abroad) and nationality (only a few are foreigners).

In terms of the profile of the interviewees, there were some minor changes between
the early 1990s and 2006/2008. Three respondents (all of Turkish origin) had since acquired
Dutch and officially renounced their Turkish nationality. Moreover, in terms of education,
there seems to be greater uniformity in the respondents recently re-interviewed: five
of the 16 had only undertaken vocational or a lower level of training in 1990, but had
continued their education since then. Accordingly, all 16 respondents have now achieved
a higher level of education, in either academic or vocational terms (HBO).

a. The development of careers

To briefly summarise the observations presented in the previous chapter, the majority of
the respondents, although born and raised outside the Netherlands, began their political
activities in the country. Nevertheless, a substantial number had also had political
involvement in their country of origin. The overwhelming majority were affiliated to left-
wing parties at the time of their first election, and party membership was relatively recent.
Most of the respondents were asked to stand in the election, in a context where parties
were eager to appeal to the new foreign electorate (although almost all respondents
were Dutch nationals) and many new political positions had been created.

One of the striking outcomes of the new series of interviews with these same
politicians is that only one of them still held a political mandate (as deputy mayor in
a district of Amsterdam). As explained in Chapter IV, deputy mayors do not necessarily
need to be elected, and this was the case with this respondent.

For all 23 of the respondents interviewed in the 1990s (save for one) information
is available about when they left the city council or their district council. The average
duration of mandate was seven and a half years; in other words, slightly less than two
terms. Three respondents remained in office for 12 years. In contrast, two others had left
the council early after three years.

Although the figures are not comparable,13 the average of seven and a half years in
office is greater than the average number of years spent in office by all of Amsterdam’s
city councillors in the period 1986-2002 (fewer than five years), while the average length
of time in office of all of the district councillors in the district of Slotervaart14 between
1990 and 2002 was a little more than 6 years. This is, however, less than the average
of eight and a half years in office referred to by Tjalma-den Oudsten (2006, p.5) on the
basis of a survey of Dutch municipal councillors. If all this information is put together, the
length of the careers of the respondents in Amsterdam does not appear to be radically
different from that of councillors in general. One of the re-interviewed respondents
explained that there is nothing specific to ethnic minority politicians when it comes to
how long is spent in office:

In the Netherlands, people stay on the council for a while, there is a hard core of
people... let's say the die-hards, who stay, and they make it a profession... but the large

13. It is not comparable because the average time in office of the respondents combines the years spent
both at city and district level. However, the average period given for all city councillors in Amsterdam does
not include the years eventually spent by some politicians in a district council prior to the election at the
municipal level.
14. There was no particular reason to choose Slotervaart here; it was the only district for which data was
made available.
majority stays in office for a few years and then leaves. If I think of those who were in the council with me... how many of them are still elected? Maybe... you can count them on the fingers of one hand.

Furthermore, it also appears that the majority of the respondents had held only one type of political position, at the local level: six had had a seat on the city council and 13 on a district council. One respondent was first elected at district level, and then spent four years on the city council before later returning to the district council. Three respondents were first elected to a district council and subsequently to the city council. In other words, 21 of those interviewed in the early 1990s have remained on the local stage, while only two respondents have moved onto other levels: one was elected to the regional council for three years, while another has been an MP for seven years.

Leaving the political arena after a few years in office thus seems to be common. During the new series of interviews (with 16 of the initial 23 respondents), two individuals stated that they left office because they did not like the way things operated within the council, but for all of the other respondents, leaving the political stage was not a decision based on negative feelings. The reasons they put forward were: the end of the term (seven respondents; and no re-election, either because the individual did not stand again, or their party did not win enough votes); a new job that was incompatible with their political function (three respondents); or a move to another district or town (four respondents; in this scenario, the seat is lost immediately). One of the interviewees who lost her seat because she moved away explained that she was sorry to step down, but did not feel enough regret to try to get re-elected in her new municipality:

**Did you think it was a pity that you had to step down?**

... At the time, I did! Yes, I did. I mean, at the time, it felt like that. But I cannot say that I have regrets. If I had had regrets, I would have tried to get back to it. Well... I still believe it is a hard job. In fact I believe it is fully a job, because I think that... (...) I often hear people say about politicians: “they’re just there for the money”... Well, a politician, or a councillor does a lot more than that. My experience was that next to what you do in the council, you have to stay in touch with the population, and that costs a lot of money... and at that time I had two little children... and I had my job, and other civic activities... that was quite hard. I still think it is difficult to combine all that. Now that the children are older I would have a bit more time... so... but no, I have no regrets.

Most of the respondents stated that it was their own decision to leave politics. They typically thought that it was time to do something else, such as returning to their professional career. One explained that stepping down did not mean that he disliked politics, but instead thought that doing so was both good for him and necessary:

I wanted to broaden my horizons... I wanted to do something completely different for a few years... I had a job as consultant while I was elected to the council, but at some point I wanted to leave the council completely, I wanted to work in the private sector for a while...

**Why was that important for you?**

... because if you are totally immersed in politics, at some point you run the risk of becoming a bit dull, many things become self-evident, and you need to reset from
time to time, at least that is what I think... You need to reset your hard disk and... and try to do something completely different so as to get inspired and acquire new experiences.

Disappointment about their experiences in the council and with their political career was not a factor for any of the respondents. There can of course be disappointments: the inability to achieve certain goals or to advance, or concern about how politics works. One interviewee who expressed the most disappointment explained how she tried to launch a change in the municipality's policy towards immigrant children, but failed to convince the rest of the council. This led to her leaving her role:

I discovered that I could not change things. I had become a candidate because I wanted a change for women and immigrants, and I could not change things. (...) The first year, I was rather passive, I wanted to observe, see how you have to do things. The second year, I started to become active: I wrote reports, I made propositions. My most important project was to make pre-school intake mandatory, so that immigrant children would not be held back with regard to the Dutch language. (...) My party agreed with my proposal, except for one or two colleagues who were always against everything, but the rest of the council did not back my proposal. They thought that it was too expensive, while the municipality financed other projects that were less important! And eventually the national government could have financed it. It was a crucial proposal and it was rejected. I am still angry about this!

However, even when they evoked such disappointments, the respondents stated that they did not regret their political experience and had learned a great deal. By and large, they were satisfied with what they had learnt and experienced. One interviewee summarised most of the positive remarks made by the other respondents when asked to look back on his experiences:

What did you like about being a councillor?
... Well... I liked... I liked the fact that I had [played] my part in deciding about important societal matters... I liked my political group very much, the people I worked with. I liked working together with other parties... and I learned a lot. I learned about the political structure in the Netherlands, how it all works (...) And... also I liked the fact that I could take care of the interests of underprivileged groups. I liked being so active here, I am proud that I have been civically active.

What was valued most, by almost all of the respondents, was the learning process. They frequently explained that they learnt about how the city functions and who does what. Moreover, they had also learned to look at administrative processes in a different way, and had personally benefitted from doing so. To cite one of the respondents:

The experience gained within the council... you can't gain it anywhere else! You cannot follow a course... because it does not exist. I have greatly benefited from this experience, it was good for my own development.

The (16) re-interviewed respondents may have left their elected positions, but nine of them were still members of the party that they represented at the beginning of the
1990s. Two had, however, changed parties: one left the social democrats to join the social liberal party (D66) and then the green party, while the other left D66 to join a local party (active only in his neighbourhood), and then founded his own party in the area. Five respondents were no longer party members. These figures support the notion that it was not due to conflicts with the party that these respondents decided to leave their role. It is also clear that a majority of those who were re-interviewed had not closed the door on the political arena completely. Nine of the 16 are either already involved in political activities, or stated that they might consider holding a political position in the future, mainly referring to (appointed) executive roles.

b. The role of ethnicity

In Chapter IV on the issue of access to politics, we saw that the group of respondents elected in the early 1990s believed that they had benefitted from their ethnic background in the context of the 1990 elections. Of course, this was not the only factor to play a role, and in itself is obviously not enough to achieve political access, but an ethnic minority identity was apparently valued by the parties. So, what role did it play after that? One of the respondents argued that it is by being re-elected that ethnic minority politicians can overcome this positive discrimination issue:

Up to a specific point, it is an asset to be an immigrant, there is positive discrimination. But past that point, you have to be better than the others if you want to stand your ground and to make progress. If Aboutaleb or Albayrak were to become a minister, it would be a case of positive discrimination: the PvdA would appoint them to set an example. But in order to keep their position, or come back after elections, they would have to be very good at what they do.

Fifteen years later, all of the respondents had either lost or given up their seat (only one still held a political office). We also saw that with regard to the length of time spent in local politics, there is nothing with which to distinguish these respondents from other local councillors. Furthermore, ethnicity does not appear to have played a part in the end of the respondents’ political careers. Indeed, only one individual mentioned that his decision to end his political career was partially motivated by a change in his party’s standpoint on the issue of ethnic diversity:

The reason why I quit politics, well, there were different reasons, and one of the reasons was the course chosen by the party. In 2000, 2001. (…) With regard to people. I mean with regard to ethnic minorities. They had always said, from the top of the party to the bottom: they are enriching. And people can integrate without a problem while retaining their own identity, they can participate and they do not need to renounce their identity. That had always been the official position of the party, because that is how it was created. That was really important to me, because it was not just like: oh, well, you are nice people, no, it had a profound meaning. It was an important issue, and it was important to show why they thought about it like that. And... all of a sudden, all of that was gone! All gone.

15. The interview was conducted before the government was formed (in February 2007), and Ahmed Aboutaleb and Nebahat Albayrak were in the race for a position as a minister. They both are secretaries of state at this point in time.
Not much was said during the interviews about the impact, whether positive or negative, that their ethnicity had had on the course of the respondents’ careers. Remarks about this issue (by six subjects) were rather incidental, although they all seemed to be coming from the same point of view: ethnicity is mobilised by others (the party and/or the electorate) against the respondents. Why and how this happens differed for those who mentioned it, but the issue of ethnicity seems to be particularly utilised in certain situations: during electoral campaigns, at the time when the respondent tries to attain a new position, and/or in the case of a conflict with the party.

Ethnic labelling, at the cost of the respondent, most often occurred within the parties. One of the particular situations in which this happens is when the electoral lists are formed: parties strive to produce ‘perfect’ lists, with the ideal combination of profiles that reflect the diversity of society. In this process, candidates can be reduced to their ethnicity, which was the case with a Surinamese respondent. He wanted to be elected to parliament, but the national candidacy procedure within his party meant that he ended up being in competition with other ethnic minority candidates for a secure, eligible, position on the list:

The candidacy process has three rounds. I came through the three rounds, and I ended at position 52. My section started a lobby to get me higher on the list. There was a Moluccan man on the list, and a Surinamese woman, and me. So they were trying to secure a higher position for me. And the chairman of the commission said that I was a good candidate, but that there already was a Surinamese on the list. And he explained that if I would get a higher position on the list, the Moluccan candidate would end up lower on the list, which was problematic.

The ethnic background of this respondent was used against him in this particular situation, and his national aspirations were thus blocked. Another respondent also experienced ethnic labelling within his party, but in different circumstances. He was deputy mayor in his district, and his party wanted him to step down and leave the position free for someone else. In the conflict that ensued, the respondent was accused of having a clientelist attitude, which, he argued, is only levelled at ethnic minority politicians:

During that period of time, I have been deputy mayor for a year and a half. And then you see the problem again, the problem I mentioned earlier about ethnic minorities. Because… I had a conflict within the party because people said that I was clientelist. (...) In politics, that is normal! But when Blacks do that, it becomes something bad. Then it is called clientelism. You see what I mean? But if you look at what Bos and Marijnissen [national political leaders] want to do, if a Black person would do that, you would hear people say: that is clientelism. No way: that is satisfying your electorate.

For another respondent, ethnic labelling was not an incidental phenomenon, but a more structural one within his party. He believed that his origins were crucial in the perception the party had of him. He regretted and opposed this, because it did not coincide with how he wanted to be perceived:

Within the party, I was always seen as being Surinamese. That was difficult for me. Because I got stuck. On the one hand, I was telling the Surinamese people about the
The remarks made about the role of ethnicity in the development of careers are rather insignificant, as was mentioned above: for the majority of the respondents, it seems to have played a role in access, but not after that. For those who brought the issue up, ethnicity seems to have been a burden, as opposed to the resource it was initially.
In Chapter IV, we saw that the group of respondents interviewed in the early 1990s in Amsterdam could be characterised by a relative level of homogeneity, both in terms of profile (with regard to gender, migration history and level of education in particular) and how they got access to the local political arena. The respondents disclosed a relatively brief period of party membership before their first election, they had been asked to join the party lists, and appeared to have benefited from the context of the early 1990s, which was particularly welcoming to ethnic minority politicians.

When we look at the course of these respondents’ political careers, we can also see many similarities. Firstly, they had all lost their seats or resigned by the time they were re-interviewed recently. Furthermore, their careers took place at the local level only: a few tried to reach the regional or national level, but only two succeeded. Finally, satisfaction prevails when looking back on their careers, while their exit from politics was driven by apolitical motivations and feelings of serenity.

The length of stay on the council (seven and a half years on average) is very much in line with what is known about councillors in the Netherlands more generally. Indeed, in how they conceive their careers, the respondents seem to have adopted the Dutch way of practicing local politics, despite (for the large majority) their socialisation in their country of origin. Their political careers are local careers, which are characterised by a limited number of years in office and overall satisfaction. Using Weber’s terminology, the way in which the respondents exercised their political mandate fits with the notion of politics as an avocation: “politics is, neither materially nor ideally, ‘their life’ in the first place” (Weber, 1946 [1921], p.83).

This job and career satisfaction can be linked to the description of the political system of Amsterdam, which was described in Chapter III. I have argued that the prerogatives of the council, which really controls the executive, make the position of councillor valuable and potentially interesting. Indeed, the conclusions of this chapter confirm that being a councillor in Amsterdam is motivating in itself, which is supported by the fact that the respondents did not attempt to pursue their careers at other levels of government.

Ethnicity, which appears to have played a role when gaining access to politics, does not explain why the respondents chose to conduct their political careers in the way that they did, and nor does it appear to have had an impact on how and why they left the local political arena. When asked to reflect on the development of their careers, the respondents only rarely evoked anything relating to their origins. For the few who did so, their ethnicity was mainly seen as a burden, and was ascribed to the individual by the party.

### III. Comparing the development of political careers

The comparison between the two cases presented herein – the development of the political careers of politicians elected in Amsterdam and the Parisian region in the early 1990s – reveals important differences. The respondents have different profiles (the group in Amsterdam shares a number of important features, while the group of French respondents is heterogeneous), took different paths to gain access to politics (the respondents in Amsterdam were asked to join a list, while the French insisted that this was
due to their long-standing party engagement), and have followed very different political career paths over time. The respondents in Amsterdam have either left or lost their seat, remaining on the city or district council for (on average) seven and a half years, and then resuming their professional career. The respondents in the Parisian region, however, had had two types of careers (local or partisan) in a variety of situations. On average, these political careers were (much) longer in France.

These important differences in profile and type of career between the two national cases point to the influence of context. Given the variation in ethnic background in both locations, and the variations in profile in France, the differences between the cases are best explained by referring to the political culture and context of each national case. Ethnic minority politicians make political careers that, by and large, seem to fit the profile of the career that is typical for each context.

The facts that when compared to the French case careers appear to be relatively brief and are limited to one level of government for councillors in the Netherlands (the respondents are not an exception) raise questions. Could it be that the more open a political system, the more political careers are restricted in time and place? Amsterdam has been characterised as an open political system: some features of the electoral system enhance the positive representation of society in terms of its diversity (proportionality, low thresholds and the enfranchisement of foreigners, see Chapter III). These factors favour the gaining of access to the political arena by members of ethnic minorities (as was described in Chapter IV). The careers observed within this context are limited when compared to those of their French colleagues. Many of their French counterparts would assume that the Amsterdam councillors lack ambition, while those who were elected in Amsterdam might not understand the obstinacy, despite disappointments, of the French respondents. The interviews in the Parisian region seem to show that (at least for some of the respondents) the threshold for entry into the (local) political arena is high, but that once you are in, you stay in. This highlights a strong interdependence with the political party; the individual politicians and the parties seem to be stuck with each other and, therefore, also stick together. In contrast, in Amsterdam, the thresholds appear to have been relatively low in the early 1990s, with a lower threshold for an exit as a corollary. The relationship with the party also seems much looser in Amsterdam than in the Parisian region (as was also observed in the previous chapter).

It is interesting to link this to Weber’s dichotomy of politics as a vocation or an avocation (Weber, 1946 [1921], p.83). We see that in the open political system of Amsterdam, politics is the latter, while in the Parisian region many respondents see their political career as a vocation. But how are the conceptions of politics linked to the features of both systems? Is politics conceived of as an avocation because the system is open, or does an open system follow from the fact that people see politics as an avocation? Although trying to answer this question is in some way beyond the scope of the present work, I would tend to argue that an open political system requires politicians to be willing to abandon their position at some point. In an open system, politicians know in advance that the corollary to their easy access is the easy access of others, at the expense of their own political career.

One of the issues of concern has been the role of origins and ethnicity in politics. In none of the cases under study here is this clear-cut. It is present in many ways, and has been at various stages of the political careers of the ethnic minority councillors.
Nevertheless, the comparison demonstrates that ethnicity seems to have helped the Amsterdam respondents to gain access to local politics in the early 1990s, while for their French counterparts it has played a much more marginal role. More generally, in both contexts (even though it is more clearly the case in the Parisian region than in Amsterdam), ethnicity does not constitute an impediment to access to politics, but can become so when people try to achieve more high-profile political positions. Furthermore, the longitudinal study of the development of careers in both contexts presented here supports the notion that while ethnicity may be an advantage in terms of access (which was quite clearly the case in Amsterdam in the 1990s), it is not a resource when it comes to the development of careers.