Ethnic minorities in local politics: comparing Amsterdam and Paris

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Chapter VI
Conceptions of Representation

Theoretical discussions of representation have always revolved around a few basic controversies, as detailed in Chapter II, and whether representation is a matter of group or general interest is an important part of these debates. This issue is particularly interesting to address in the case of ethnic minority councillors, since these politicians are often believed to stand for a particular ethnic group (or a more abstract idea of diversity), while the dominant conceptions of representation in both France and the Netherlands are strongly linked to the principle of the defence of the general interest. Accordingly, the aim of this chapter is to analyse who or what it is that the ethnic minority councillors say they represent. Special attention is paid to the extent to which the respondents maintained that they wished to represent specific groups (and, ultimately, their own) and/or their party. The relationship to the party has been highlighted as a relevant factor in the Western European context, and has also been addressed in the previous chapter, when looking at the development of the careers of these politicians.

The other issue that is addressed in this chapter concerns the practice of representation. Little is known about what it is that representatives actually do and how they represent us. Based upon the theoretical discussion of whether representatives should act as trustees or delegates, it seems particularly important to look at the contact that the respondents have with the electorate and specific groups within it, and what actions they take as a result. As this was not addressed in the early 1990s’ interviews, I will only consider the practice of representation dealt with in the discourses of the respondents interviewed in Amsterdam in 2008 and in Paris in 2007 and 2008.

In order to explore the conceptions of representation in the discourses of the ethnic minority subjects in this study, all references to representation and the content thereof were coded (who they wished to represent, how, why, and what representation involves,
I. Conceptions of representation in the discourses of the respondents interviewed in Amsterdam in the early 1990s

When looking at what or who the ethnic minority politicians elected in Amsterdam in the early 1990s said they represent, it first appears that they combined different references when talking about the issue (18 of the 23 respondents did this). Conceptions that might, theoretically, seem contradictory (e.g. the representation of both the entire population and immigrants) were often expressed by the same individual. Table 6.1 records the occurrence of the kinds of references made to representation, and indicates in bold type the dominant conception of each of the 23 respondents.

The most common reference to representation (by 18 respondents) was the notion that one represents all inhabitants (10 respondents), and this was sometimes combined with the idea of having a special interest in specific groups (10 respondents). The following quote from one interviewee, who stated that he represents everyone in his district, is interesting, as it reveals the expectations he faced:

I am not only a candidate for the rank and file, also for Dutch people, I am candidate for all inhabitants of the district. I don’t make any distinction in this.

This respondent has apparently been confronted with the notion that he ought to represent a specific group, but insists that he represents everyone. Furthermore, it was necessary for him to clarify that he also represents his Dutch constituents. This highlights the fact that the respondent felt that he was expected to be affiliated to a particular “rank and file”, which would not include Dutch people. It is not, however, clear who among the party or the electorate had attributed such a specific group to him.

When the respondents say that they have a special focus on a certain group, this group is defined in terms of being underprivileged, discriminated against, or lacking access to the political arena. This applies to socio-economic groups, ethnic groups or immigrants more generally. An example of how to combine representation of the entire

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1. For more details on how the interviews were coded, see Appendix 5.
2. The dominant conception of a respondent was identified by looking at what was stressed most by the individual and the number of references to the different conceptions of representation.
Table 6.1: References to representation in the discourses of the respondents interviewed in Amsterdam in 1990 and 1994, by occurrence (dominant conception in bold)

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<tr>
<th>Representation of:</th>
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*Two respondents both stated that they represent everyone in their district, and that they care about the general interest. Both concepts are seen as overlapping.

NB: The respondents are grouped according to origins, R referring to those with a mixed background (Indonesian/Dutch; Antillean/Surinamese); NA to the respondents of North-African origin; S to those from Surinam and T to those of Turkish origin.

One respondent (T3) does not express a dominant conception of representation: he wishes to represent both the party and the voters.
population with a special interest in one particular group was provided by a respondent of Surinamese origin, who was elected to the city council:

Look, I have always said that I do not solely represent the ethnic minorities. I was elected by the “Amsterdammers” [inhabitants of Amsterdam]. I represent the “Amsterdammers”, both immigrants and autochthones. However, I also look at the position of groups within the city. And I can see that those who have low incomes, those who live on social benefits, and the immigrants are underprivileged. They therefore need special attention.

One of the interview questions concerned who the respondents regarded as the rank and file. The Dutch term (“achterban”) can refer to both supporters and voters, and this is reflected in the responses the interviewees gave. There was an important reference to representation in the answers given to this question. Eleven respondents stated that they represent all voters. It is important to note here that elected representatives can receive personal votes in the Netherlands, but despite this most of the interviewees referred to their party’s voters. This is also clear in Table 6.1: the idea that one represents the voters was usually combined with the notion that one also represents the party. To cite one of the respondents who expressed such a view:

My rank and file is constituted of those who voted for the PvdA. That’s it actually, nothing more and nothing less.

Three respondents referred to their “own” voters, reflecting on the preferential votes they received. Getting such votes is a marker of personal legitimacy as a representative. However, when looking at what the interviewees said about their “own” voters, it is striking that they were primarily careful to claim that a variety of people had chosen them. An example of this was provided by a respondent of Turkish origin:

I know that Moroccan, Surinamese, and Turkish and Dutch people have voted for me. I know that they cast their vote for me personally.

Again, we can see that the respondents wanted to remove themselves from the image of being an ethnic representative who was elected by co-ethnics and was accountable to them. From a different point of view, the fact that only a few respondents spoke about their “own” voters suggests that most do not see themselves as being personally elected. Other parts of the interviews revealed that a majority believed that voters choose a candidate because of the party, and not only because of the individual.

The idea that one represents the party was quite widespread in the interviews: nine respondents made this point. One example of this was expressed by an interviewee in the following way:

Well, you represent a political movement. Without the party you are nothing. You are only yourself. You may then represent your own interest or your ideas and the like. Thus ultimately, what really counts is that you are on the same wavelength as the party.
This idea of representation is linked to the concept expressed by four respondents, namely that it is about political ideals. The interviewees often made the point that they joined a party because of its ideals, as can be seen in the following extract. In this sense, the representation of ideals in politics is linked to the representation of a party, as this respondent made clear:

I joined [the party] for ideological reasons. Because of a few principles, such as being a class-party, fighting for equal rights, for equal distribution, etc. etc. Because of political principles in other words. And this means that those who share these ideals are my rank and file. So my rank and file, I am not a politician in the sense that I have people, a mass of people backing me. That’s not the way it is, I am a politician, as a politician within a political structure, in the council, in a parliamentary structure but I represent, or I convey the principles of the party, so the same ideology for seven years [since he had been a party member].

This respondent thus stated that he represents the ideals of the party in the council, but, in doing so, he also stands for the ideals that made him join that particular party. Accordingly, the party, here, is more or less an instrument for the expression in a representative body of this interviewee’s personal ideals. The representation of the party and political ideals are (at least partially) linked; they are two forms of what could be described as politically induced representation. In total, 12 respondents made references to this conception of being a representative.

Other views of representation, specifically the idea that one represents a minority group, were rarely to the fore in the interviews. Five respondents stated that they represent specific groups in the council, yet how these groups were defined varied: two talked about socio-economic groups, one about his ethnic group (Turks), and three about immigrants more generally. Even so, these respondents combined the idea that they represented a specific group with other conceptions of representation: they also wished to represent the entire population or their party.

Three basic notions of representation can thus be distinguished in the respondents’ discourses: one focuses on the representation of all inhabitants (sometimes also with a special focus on underprivileged groups), another stresses the representation of group interests (all immigrants, an ethnic group and/or a social group), and yet another is linked to political ideals and/or to a party structure. If we look at the dominant reference of each interviewee, this final concept of representation was the most common (for ten of the 23 respondents), followed by the notion that the representative represents the entire population of the city or district (for eight of the 23 interviewees). Group interest representation was, however, a marginal concept in terms of what the respondents said.
II. Conceptions of representation in the discourses of the respondents interviewed in the Paris region in 1992

The respondents who were interviewed in the Parisian region in 1992 also often combined different concepts when they spoke about who or what they represent (12 of the 15 interviewees did so). Table 6.2 records the occurrence of the different types of views of representation referred to in the interviews (with each respondent’s dominant conception indicated in bold).

Two types of references were most commonly made by the respondents: the idea that one represents an ethnic group (seven), and the notion that one represents a socio-economic group (seven respondents – sometimes the same people). References to the representation of their own ethnic group were particularly frequent in the discourse of the Antillean interviewees; all but one of this group said that they represent and stand for “their community.” One expressed this idea simply and concisely: “In the first place, I am a defender of the interests of my community, that’s all.”

Another Antillean respondent made an interesting distinction between who she stands for (Antilleans), and who led to her having a place on the candidate list (women within the party):

The question should be: who am I elected by, and for whom? I was elected because the Socialist party wanted me to be elected, and because women within the party supported my candidacy. For whom? That is very clear to me: I do my job just like other elected politicians, but I feel particularly accountable to people from the overseas territories, despite the fact that they had no particular role in my election. People from the overseas territories are not yet sufficiently active or well-organised in order to play an important role in the political arena. So I believe my election, and that of others, is a starting-point. It will educate them: it will make them understand that they can play a role, and that they can be represented, but this will be reached step by step.

This woman explained that her supporters, namely the Socialist party, and particularly the women within it, were not those she wished to act for. She justified this position by explaining that she was in the role of a pioneer.

The Antillean respondents also often mentioned that once elected, they were frequently asked for help by Antilleans. The following comment by an Antillean member of the Socialist party reveals how the expectations of the community play a role. This interviewee had to take into account the fact that he was seen as a representative of the Antilleans within his municipality, as well as those outside it. He acknowledged this fact, but played it down: although he did represent Antilleans, this was only part of his work and his job. A difficult balance had to be achieved:

At the very beginning, I clarified things for my compatriots... I started by saying what I still say, when I am invited on a radio program: I am elected by the whole population, I am not elected by Antilleans only, there aren’t so many of them, not enough to say: I am elected for the Antilleans. But I do listen to them, and I do my best for them, if they have a problem I’ll try to solve them. Even so, I don’t want to become the Antilleans’ councillor. There are too many problems: problems of housing, of work,
Table 6.2: References to representation in the discourses of the respondents interviewed in the Paris region in 1992, by occurrence (dominant conception in bold)

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<tr>
<th>Representation of:</th>
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NB: The respondents are grouped according to origins: NA refers to the respondents of North-African origin; A to Antilleans.
within the families, etc. ... Every Saturday, I was on duty, and my compatriots always came. Everyone was welcome, but mostly my compatriots came, they came in droves... they even came from outside the city, from the whole “département,” and from further away. To their mind, a compatriot was elected somewhere and they thought that they could expose their problems more easily than if they tried to explain them to a “métropolitain.”3 And for me, it was easier to listen to them. “Métropolitains” also came to me when they had problems, and I was also active within a commission in the municipality. Because we are elected to implement a political program and I defended and implemented the program of the left-wing coalition.

The only respondent of North-African origin who made reference to an ethnic group was a right-wing councillor who highlighted his focus on the position of the so-called “Français musulmans.”4 He explained how this interest can be combined with concern for more general interests and the representation of his party:

Well... at the risk of sounding old-fashioned... conservative, classical, or... pompous, I will tell you: I act foremost in the superior interest of France. Because I believe that to act in the interest of craftsmen, for example, is to act, more generally, in the interest of France. To act in the interest of farmers, is also to act in the superior interest of France. And, at the moment, the most vulnerable children of this country are the “Français musulmans,” because they are rejected, almost by everyone, that are not recognised, they are not appreciated, they are... how can I say... they are the victims of a number of prejudices that do them a lot of wrong, they are considered to be foreigners while they are French, they are at home here, it is true... (…) And besides, at the risk of deceiving you maybe, or surprise you, well my further interest is simply that of my party. I consider that if I do my best for the “Français musulmans”, I will do my best for my party as well.

In this quote, very different types of representation are combined: the representation of the interests of an ethnic group, the representation of the party, and concern for the common good. The respondent believed that he was looking after the common good and his party through his defence of particular interests. Group interests were at the core of what he did as a representative, but what appealed to him most was the idea of acting in the interests of the nation.

One Antillean respondent did not put the interests of Antilleans to the fore, unlike the other Antillean representatives. He did care about the interests of this group, but did not want to only represent these people. Most important to him was the defence of the interests of the underprivileged:

When I stood in the regional election, I said that it was not only for Antilleans, I was there for the population, for working people.

Alright. But if you had to come up with a ranking, who would you put at the top of the list of those you care for?

Deprived people.

3. "Métropolitain" refers to French people from the territory of continental France, as opposed to French people from overseas territories.
4. This term originally referred to native Algerians in Algeria when it was still a French colony, and was subsequently used to define those Algerians who were “repatriated” in 1962.
Six other interviewees also expressed the idea that they represented a socially deprived group. This notion is linked to the fact that the respondents belonged to left-wing parties. To them, the parties they were part of have a duty to care about these particular groups within society.

Four respondents stressed that they represented a social group as opposed to an ethnic group, or immigrants more generally, claiming that the reason they cared for the interests of ethnic minorities was not an issue of ethnicity, but was related to the fact that these people were often in an underprivileged position in society. An example of such discourse was provided by a respondent of North-African origin:

So in fact, the social group you identify with is the group of deprived people, and it happens to be that noticeably immigrants are deprived, so there is a conjunction, but it is not...
Yes, Yes. Drugs, I mean all the plagues that young immigrants experience, these are empirical realities. Not because they are immigrants, because socially, they are in a position that... that is what it is.

The references to the representation of an ethnic and a socio-economic group are the expression of group interest representation. Another group whose interests may be represented – immigrants more generally – was also referred to, but less often: only two respondents wanted to take care of the interests of this group.

A different type of reference to representation concerned the political party to which the interviewee belonged (five respondents) and political ideals (also five interviewees). As explained above, both kinds of references are linked: they refer to representation based on a political ideology. In total, nine of the 15 respondents made statements of this kind. We have already seen a few examples of this in the comments of those who claimed that they cared about the interests of their ethnic group. Both an Antillean interviewee (who explained how he dealt with the demands of his ethnic group) and the only respondent of North-African origin to make such a statement explained that they combined ethnic group interest representation with a strong attachment to their party.

The idea that one represents a party or political ideals was either combined with the defence of ethnic group interests (by four interviewees), or, in contrast, was stressed by the respondents in opposition to the notion that they would represent an ethnic group (by three individuals). An example of this last position was provided by a respondent who reflected on the idea of working with a right-wing politician of North-African origin when he himself belonged to a left-wing movement:

A "Beur" [second generation immigrant of North-African origin] of the RPR and I have conflicting interests because of the policy I stand for and the policy he stands for. Our ideas should constitute bridges between us, not our origin.

Yet another type of reference to whom or what one represents concerned more general categories, namely the general interest (seven respondents) and France (two individuals, of which we saw an example above). An instance of the reference to the general interest
was provided by a communist respondent of North-African origin when he was asked who he represented in politics:

**Who are you in politics for?**

Well I am in politics for everyone. For young people, for immigrants, for young French people, for... for the working class, for the retired... really.

In their discourse, most interviewees combined general interest representation with the representation of particular interests. From a theoretical point of view, this would seem to be incompatible, and each respondent’s dominant conception of representation was, therefore, identified. If we look at this issue more carefully, it appears that the defence of group interests was the most common notion of representation in the opinion of the respondents interviewed in 1992 in the Parisian region. Two other conceptions of the term (the general interest and political representation) were each conveyed by four interviewees. However, the most striking outcome of the analysis of the respondents’ discourse was the difference between the individuals of North-African and Antillean origin when it came to the defence of ethnic group interests; the latter felt that they “stood for” the Antillean population. Among the other interviewees, representation was not linked to ethnicity in any sense, but was instead seen as concerning either the general interest or the party and its ideals.

### III. Conceptions of representation in the discourses of the respondents interviewed in Amsterdam in 2008

A large majority of the councillors interviewed in Amsterdam in 2008 had been elected in 2006 for the first time (see Chapter V). They were, therefore, half way through their first term as a representative. After two years in office, their experiences can shed light on the questions that guide the analysis of notions of representation; in other words, who or what is being represented? The issue of what representation involves is also dealt with here.

The first question was addressed explicitly during the interviews, and when asked who they represented on the council, a majority of the respondents said: the entire city or district (eight of the 15; see Table 6.3). This position can be illustrated by a quote from one of the city councillors:

> I want to represent everyone, all Amsterdammers, maybe it sounds like a cliché, but I actually simply wish to represent everyone.

Four other respondents preferred to speak of defending the general interest. While the representation of an entire city, or all inhabitants, pertains to whom one represents (“real people” so to speak), the general interest is a more conceptual notion. The interviewees who spoke about caring for the general interest also appeared to think of it as a higher standard of representation than forms in which the interests of real people are defended. This was made particularly clear by three respondents who were in favour of paid parking
Table 6.3: References to representation in the discourses of the respondents interviewed in Amsterdam in 2008, by occurrence (dominant conception in bold)

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<tr>
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NB: One respondent (R5) did not make any explicit reference to representation, although he was asked about it. Extracting a notion of representation from his interview seemed to be too risky.
in their district, while the population was very much against it. While the notion of paying for parking was not backed by any group in the population, the respondents defended it in the name of the general interest. One explained that she was in favour of this measure for environmental reasons:

Sometimes, although you have the role of... representative of the people, so you are elected because the inhabitants have voted for you... but that does not mean that we... should be populists... sometimes the people does not want... the inhabitants do not want something, but it simply has to happen... that is an embarrassing issue in political discussions about paid parking here... and the inhabitants do not want it. But when I think about the environmental aspects, I think: come on.

Three respondents expressed a conception of representation in which the defence of the general interest was central, but in which there was also (limited) room for the consideration of specific interests (see Table 6.3). One reflected on the interaction between particular interests and the general interest:

I believe that in the council, I think that politicians should be aware of the fact that they are not in the council for the sake of a group. In your contribution, it is possible to take into account... well, not take into account, but... you can adopt a particular point of view, and see how things are perceived, and express that, so that you... so that all interests come into the picture. But when it comes to political decision making, you have to set that aside.

Another respondent, who wished to look after the general interest while also taking group interests into consideration, adopted a classic pluralist position. She explained that it was sometimes necessary to consider group interests, so as “to make sure that all groups are part of the general interest”, which was not the case, she argued, for some migrant groups at that time. To stand up for the general interest continued to be the most important role of a representative in the opinion of these respondents, but they were also critical of how the general interest came about.

Four interviewees spoke of the representation of the interests of a particular group from another perspective. To their mind, it was their duty to make a stand for the underprivileged. They usually referred to a social-economic group (three respondents), although one claimed to be in politics for all immigrants, while another explained that he represented an ethnic group. Unexpectedly, however, this last councillor did not refer to the ethnic group he belonged to (the Surinamese; he was of Creole and Chinese Surinamese descent), instead claiming to represent the Ghanaians (and later in the interview he also referred to the Chinese) in Amsterdam:

I try to play a significant role for the Ghanaian community. (...)

*But why specifically for that group?*

Because I feel good with that group. I used to have a colleague of Ghanaian origin in Zuidoost and I got along well with him, so I got interested in that community. And the other thing is that, that should be mentioned, I was... (...) I was scout [for the party]. (...) And I put forward a Ghanaian boy. A very smart boy who studied technical management (...) and he got a position on the list. (...) But he withdrew. And so I said: listen, if he withdraws, I want to take his place. And that is how the ball got rolling.

*Ah, so you took the place of a Ghanaian and you carried that on.*
Yes, I already had a position on the list, but I said: well, he is gone now, so I want to represent you. And I went to churches for instance and the like and I was introduced in the Ghanaian community.

**And they didn’t think of it as strange, that you, because you have a Surinamese background, that you wanted to represent Ghanaians?**

No, no. They didn’t think that it was strange. They liked it, actually, because they weren’t represented.

This respondent referred to virtually all of the possible conceptions of representation: the consideration of particular group interests, the general interest, and the representation of social-economic groups and the party. He did not see any inconsistency in either his position or such combinations of conceptions of representation. This individual was also one of the two respondents who referred to the party when it came to the question of who was being represented (see Table 6.3). Such references were, therefore, rare, but were also inconclusive; they were combined with other references to who was being represented, which usually dominated.

The interviews revealed that the party was not seen as a monolithic entity, which might explain why party representation was not commonly referred to by the respondents. Five mentioned ideological debates within the party and/or within the party group in the council. One individual did not perceive such disagreements as a problem (a large party, so he said, should reflect the plurality of positions within society), but the other four interviewees felt uneasy about these ideological divergences. To them, these should not exist within a party; there should a clear and shared ideological base.

I had a different idea of how a party group works... how positions, things, are determined.

**What was your idea?**

I thought that everyone, you know, that... social democracy... that your ideas mean something... that they are the same for people, but that is not the case.

**Do you mean that you are surprised by the fact that there are many different points of view within the party group?**

Yes. ... I can't get used to that, I don't understand it. I don't understand it when a colleague says: yes, I have to make a great effort to... the emancipation... to defend gay rights. (…) Then I think: well, I am sorry, but I think that something's definitively wrong about your position. (…) It's very difficult, and it makes me sad and angry and...

**It does?**

But... Yes! Sometimes I feel more comfortable with people from other parties, on some issues.

Because of these disagreements, these respondents wondered if their party was still their (political) home. They did not, however, consider leaving, because they felt that there was no better option, i.e. they did not expect to feel any more at home within any other party. Although this was not made explicit by the interviewees, it seems as if this diversity of opinions impedes the feeling of a strong party identity, which could be translated into party representation.

These respondents, therefore, preferred to talk about representation as being linked to ideals. It, thus, has an ideological component, which was not (necessarily) linked to
the party. This might lead to a divergence between the party position and that of the representative, as is seen in an example provided by one respondent:

I said … during the discussion [in the council] on… on camera surveillance, it was stated that it would be done only in [specific areas of the district], and then I said: on principle, if we decide to do that, even if GroenLinks is in favour, I have objections of principle, and I will vote against it. But fortunately, GroenLinks chose otherwise, and we are not going to do it.

To summarise, we can look at the dominant conceptions of representation again by grouping the different types of references into three main categories: the representation of the general interest, the representation of the population and the representation of a group (including the party and, ultimately, political ideals). The first form category was by far the most common in the respondents’ discourse (11 individuals). Group interest and the representation of the party were, however, only key in the comments made by four of the 15 interviewees.

When analysing the activities that the respondents referred to as being part of their role as councillor, three areas came to the fore: contact with the electorate (five respondents), control of the executive (four respondents) and policymaking (five respondents).

Much of what the respondents said about the contact they have with the electorate (in general), or with specific groups, was a description of these contacts. Some, however, pointed to the fact that they have a duty, as representatives, to keep in touch with those they feel they should represent. Several lines of reasoning were observed. One respondent admitted that she was unknown as a district councillor, and she, therefore, felt that she had a duty to rectify this. Another stated: “I want people to see that they can reach me easily.” He argued that it was his duty to make the political arena accessible to all of the inhabitants in the city. He also thought that it was necessary to add: “yet I don’t make any promises.” Five respondents insisted that they did not make promises to people; they did not want to give the impression that contact with the electorate could be equated with patronage. One argued that it was important that she was in contact with the electorate for the sake of her political party.

I want to be reached so easily that even someone who voted for the PvdA, or for GroenLinks… that even they can get in touch with me. (...) That is something that I try to convey, I don’t know how I should do that… But I do so by precisely going to many meetings where people wouldn’t expect someone from the VVD [to be there]. People from the VVD are actually a bit lazy, they… something like: I would only go if something’s in there for me… (...) I try to get our interest for welfare in the party group at a higher level… than is usual for the VVD, so that people can see that we do have an interest in welfare, well, of course with our own… program… and policy, but that we do have an interest.

This respondent – and another had a similar position – used her work as a representative to reach out to groups in the population which, on the basis of her party affiliation, would not ordinarily get in touch with her. Interestingly, for these two respondents, the ideas of representing everyone and electoral profit both appeared to be guiding such outgoing behaviour.
A quite different role of the representative that was mentioned by four respondents was the duty to control the executive (i.e. the mayor and the deputy mayors). One explained that she was greatly inspired by a publication by the Dutch association of municipalities (VNG), which she received when she was elected. The document was entitled “The Council Decides” (“De raad is de baas”) and she still felt very strongly about this seemingly simple statement:

I often quote that in the council, whenever we do not agree with the board, and my colleagues know this from me, so last time, I started to say: the council... and they said: yes, the council decides!

Policymaking was the third issue that was raised in the interviews when it came to what representation involves. Five respondents explained that as representatives, they must turn people’s problems and questions into policy measures and, in doing so, they sometimes have to take the lead (if the executive does not act). One of the interviewees explained:

I stay motivated, because I feel that if you are willing to put something in [the position of councillor], and you are patient, you can also get something back. A few resolutions that, that I had introduced myself, and after some time, after the mills of government have ground, after the preliminary advice etc., and it is finally implemented, and you see your own work, your point of view, and you see a real improvement in policy, then you know that you are doing things the right way. Then I think: that is the reason why I am here.

The respondents particularly insisted on the notion that they, as representatives, took the initiative. While policymaking is primarily a role for the executive, they had the space to initiate policies as well, and such an opportunity was, apparently, appealing to them. They were, however, quite vague about what it was that they had initiated, and it may be that the existence of the opportunity was more important than actually putting it into practice. A summary of what representation involves was provided by one of the respondents, a member of the city council:

As a city councillor, you have a certain responsibility, because you are in the council as a representative of the people, and your main duty is of course to control the executive, but... another important task is to... to maintain contact with... the people that you represent, and that you take the initiative when things are not going the way they should, or when you see that policy should be made for certain issues that occur in society.

The analysis of the conceptions of representation contained in the discourses of the respondents interviewed in Amsterdam in 2008 reveals a general consensus. Representatives do not wish to stand up for the interests of ethnic groups, immigrants, or any other group in society; neither do they represent their party on the council. Representation was, thus, defined in the interviews as the process by which the interests of the entire population are taken into account, and (ultimately) taken to the higher level of the general interest. When looking at what representation involves, a number of
different duties were spelt out in the interviews, and these (policy making, contact with the electorate and control of the executive) give the impression that being a representative is a very active role in which, again, the idea of the defence of the general interest is key.

IV. Conceptions of representation in the discourse of the respondents interviewed in Paris in 2007/2008

The group of respondents interviewed in Paris in 2007 and 2008 was somehow a hybrid when it came to the practice of representation. The length of time spent in office differed substantially between those elected in March 2008 (a few months before they were interviewed) and those interviewed in 2007, who had been in office for at least six years. Representation was, thus, addressed either as a long-term (with the six who were interviewed in 2007) or a new experience (for the 11 interviewed in 2008). However, this difference in the practice of the position of representative was not reflected in what the respondents said when it came to the issue of who or what was being represented (see Table 6.4), or what representation involved. If, in addition to this fact, there had been a clear consensus on what or whom the respondents wished to represent, this could have pointed to a strong mechanism of integration or adaptation on the part of the political elite. As this was not the case, the very different conceptions of representation that emerged revealed that whatever their experience as a representative, ethnic minority politicians in Paris had different ways of interpreting their role.

One of the main references to what was being represented was to political ideals (six respondents). These ideals were an important motivation for the respondents in terms of their political engagement; they usually stated that it was the reason why they had wanted to get elected. The following extract from the interview in 2007 with a member of the Conseil de Paris is illustrative of this:

So yes, I got engaged in the elections, but I did not think about being elected, I thought about doing everything that I could, I did not think about being elected. (…) It was not the aim. But due to numbers, to the laws, based on a certain percentage of votes, you have an elected representative. So to come back to your question: did I wish to get elected for the Greens, no. I did not think about it, I simply wanted to be active, and that my life and my... would be in conformity with myself.

From the perspective of this respondent, and the five others who spoke about it in these terms, representation is grounded in an idealistic motivation and also has an optimistic aim. Furthermore, three of these respondents stated that they wanted to put their ideals into practice, and this was the reason why they were on the council. To cite one of them:

I have an ideal, I have ideas, I put them into practice and I see them arise.
Table 6.4: References to representation in the discourses of the respondents interviewed in Paris in 2007 and 2008, by occurrence (dominant conception in bold)

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<tr>
<th>Representation of:</th>
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<th>R72</th>
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NB: respondents are grouped by the year of interview (R7..: respondent interviewed in 2007; R8.. respondent interviewed in 2008). One respondent (R73) did not make any explicit reference to representation, although she was asked repeatedly about it. She talked at length about what she does not want to represent, but extracting a notion of representation from that seemed to be too risky.
If we look at Table 6.4, this view was never combined with the conception of representation expressed by five other respondents, who stated that they represented the entire population. One of them put it simply and strongly:

We are representatives of the “République”, we are everyone’s representatives.

An ideological notion of representation, thus, seemed to be opposed to an all encompassing conception thereof. Notwithstanding this, representing the entire population was often a matter of principle, as the statement of a district deputy mayor revealed. She explained that refusing to speak Arabic with the people who came to see her was a way of stressing that she was there to represent the entire population:

Last Monday for example, a North-African lady came by, and she started to talk to me in Arabic. I told her: ‘no, we speak French.’ ‘Yes, but I don’t speak French well.’ I said: ‘We speak French and then we’ll see. I can speak Arabic a little.’ ‘I can’t speak French well’... to, how can I say... I said: ‘I don’t speak Arabic well.’ Well, that is not true, I can speak Arabic well, but still, I put things back, you need to... When I talk to someone in the corridor, I will speak French.

Is that what you mean when you said that you forced yourself a little, so things like that, that you tried to show...

Exactly. That I represent the whole... but even for the community, for French people, and many people come to see me, and write to me because... Indeed, I represent the whole population, and not... that is really important, I think, for the future. Because it conveys the idea that I am French. And it conveys this to young people: you are French.

Symbols appeared to be very important to this interviewee. She attached great importance to the fact that she, the child of a guest worker, represented everyone, and she was also determined that people should see her as being French. She was not only concerned about her notion of representation, but, more generally, the integration of immigrants at large appeared to be at stake.

So far as this last point is concerned, there seems to be a connection between the position of the five respondents who stated that they represented the entire population, and the three who said that they represented France. These interviewees expressed pride in being representatives of the French Republic. “It’s quite something”, one of them said, “and I am pretty proud of it.” For another individual, being elected, and thus representing France, was the ultimate response, especially to his colleague representatives who had questioned his attachment to the country:

[My origins are] often referred to... not aggressively. But it is referred to. They [in the assembly] look at me like that. Not physically and regarding what I do, but they, they are not mistaken. They refer to it. Indeed. Anyway, it is the way I feel it... It is something you feel... Now, I can say: of course France is my country, and moreover I represent it.

The discrepancy between the respondents’ conceptions of representation and the ways in which others looked at them were explicitly highlighted in another interview. When asked who or what he represented, a district councillor began by assuming that he had
been asked about his representation of the Black population. He ultimately asserted that he was concerned with the district’s entire population:

**Who or what do you want to represent as elected politician? Because when you are elected, you represent. So how do you fill it in?**

... Ah yes, you mean if it is Blacks, or...

**Oh, not necessarily! No, I ask about this in...**

Well, I am elected in a district.

**Yes.**

That is what it is. So all I do, I do for the district. There is great diversity in the district. So my role is to see to it that we still live together despite our differences. Despite the way we see things. That we live together respectfully in the district. That’s it. I globalise these... I... It is the district [that I represent].

It was fortunate that the misunderstanding was spoken of explicitly. The respondents knew that they were being interviewed because of their ethnic minority background and, certainly in the case of this interviewee, expected to face certain preconceptions about who he was and what he did. This example also revealed that this respondent was familiar with expectations regarding his representativeness, and we can assume that it was not the first time that he had been confronted with them.

Yet another important reference to what the respondents wished to represent concerned the general interest. Five interviewees made such statements. It appeared that the respondents saw it as their duty to maintain the general interest; it was typically the task of the council and, more particularly, the executive to overlook particular interests and formulate a general interest position. One respondent, elected in a district, explained how she, as part of the municipal team, had to translate the issues raised by inhabitants into general concerns:

We have to help them to find the general preoccupation, [they need to find] what is the general interest for them, and what are the implications for the general interest... for the whole neighbourhood.

This extract reflects a conception of representation both as an ideal (defending the general interest) and a concrete task (doing something about the concerns of constituents). Other respondents were also attached to the notion that being elected at the local level was interesting as it provided the opportunity to introduce measures that were tangible.

From a slightly different perspective, one respondent evoked the issue of the general interest while also discussing the learning process of being a representative. To him, that was the distinction between being a representative and being a party activist:

You need to have priorities. And... well, yes, that is... let's say that... becoming a politician led me to become conscious of... more generally of the issue of the general interest. And not simply of the issue of the party interest, like when I was a civic activist.

This respondent thus sees an incompatibility between representing the general interest and representing a party. This is indeed reflected in Table 6.4; the two conceptions did
not coincide in the respondents’ discourse (except in the case of one interviewee). Those who stated that they were, in some way or another, part of the council for the sake of their party, particularly stressed the fact that their legitimacy as representatives did, indeed, stem from the party. In the words of one of them:

The elected politician is there [in the council] because he was elected, chosen by the party activists who made it possible, behind the scenes, for him to be elected by the inhabitants.

This quote quite rightly highlights the role that parties play in the selection of the candidates who may eventually be elected. They make the “choice before the choice” (Rahat, 2007, p.157), and, as this respondent argues, party activists thus provide legitimacy before the voters are able to. He, therefore, believes that he has a particular responsibility towards these activists.

Other references to whom or what one represents were limited in what the respondents said. One stated that she had a specific role when it came to the co-ethnics in her district. This ethnic group was not, however, known to have any specific problems (it was comprised, mainly and particularly in that district, of highly educated and well-to-do immigrants), and the respondent had difficulty in saying what she actually did for the group. Ultimately, she said that she wanted to act as a bridge between her home country and France.

Much more common was the assertion that the respondents did not represent their ethnic group, or indeed immigrants more generally. One extract is illustrative of this:

I always said that I do not represent the immigration (sic), which does not mean that I don’t raise matters related to it, or that I don’t work on such matters, that is a totally different issue. When people vote for me, I don’t want them to say: I vote only for immigration. By the way, I am quite pleased that I am rarely cited as being... of an immigrant background, people forget about me and that is fine. (...) Recently, I did the campaign for the legislative elections, I never believed in such a thing as the ethnic vote and I do not particularly care... about communities... but that does not mean that, at some point, I don’t have a specific sensitivity towards them [as a member of the executive], and because of that, I will be able to talk about it more than others. That is normal. A farmer who is elected will talk more about agriculture; that is a matter he knows well, that’s it...

There was, thus, no clear consensus about what or whom the respondents wished to represent. If we look at the dominant conceptions of representation that were expressed, there were two main types of discourse: one that focused on the general interest (eight respondents) and one that concentrated on political representation (seven). The interviewees, therefore, clearly avoided the issue of group interest representation.

Turning to what representation involves, we can see that there was a large group of respondents (11 of the 17) who agreed on why they wanted to be elected: they wished to act. One described the transition from party politics to being elected to the council as being like the difference between theory and practice:
Well, yes, to be elected... means... you are confronted with other... In a way, it is like, let’s say the theory, indeed, and now we are really confronted with... with real problems that have to be solved. While when you are an ordinary militant... well, you think, you... you are a politician!

In the same vein, another respondent insisted that the role of a representative is to bring concrete policies to fruition. She saw this as a particular duty that local representatives have. Furthermore, she argued that this is what constituents expect:

As representatives, even more as deputy mayors, or what we call local representatives, and I think that the same holds true for an MP, we really are chosen by people in order to bring about tangible things and not only values... we do defend those values, but we have to translate them into acts.

From these two quotes, it appears that ideals are intrinsic to politics but that representation means going further by putting these into practice. Furthermore, the fact that many respondents insisted that their role was to solve people’s problems implies that representatives are in a position to change things. Ultimately, although it was never explicitly put in this way, the respondents wanted to get elected because of the power they could wield in this position. One, who was elected in a district held by the opposition (i.e. in principle, without much power in the area) reflected on that:

It is indeed better to be elected. I can sense that... People don’t look at you in the same way when you are elected and when you are not, I mean that well... you have a seat on committee boards... in committees of... well, I don’t hold a seat, but when you hold a seat in a housing allocation committee or day care allocation committee, you clearly have the opportunity to act. So clearly... the idea was to have the possibility to act.

Expressed explicitly here is the notion that the opportunity to wield power may be more important than the actual exercise of power, especially because, in the eyes of others, the mere fact of being elected conveys the notion that one has some authority. Other respondents have a greater chance to act (than the district councillor cited above), as they are (district) deputy mayors or have a “délégation.” One of them explained that her ability to influence things was the most gratifying aspect of her work as a representative:

The most attractive part [of being in office], indeed, is to be able to influence things and say to yourself that you have succeeded.

There are, thus, two different aspects to this element of the role of representative: taking action is a duty one has towards one’s constituents, but it also appeals to (some of) the respondents personally. Although this comes as no surprise, it clarifies that people get elected both for the sake of others and for themselves.

Another way to look at what representation entails was expressed by six respondents, who saw it as their duty to be useful to their constituents. This is different to the previous point (although from that perspective also, some respondents wanted to do things to change people’s lives), because there is direct contact between the representative and an individual constituent, and the idea is to solve an individual problem.
Many respondents hold so-called “permanences”, meaning that their office is open to people on a certain day of the week and at a particular time. Representatives are then confronted with people’s personal problems: some need housing, others a job, a residence permit, or day-care for their children. One of the respondents, a deputy mayor, stated that “a representative must answer the requests of the inhabitants.”

Being in contact with people is one of the things that the respondents valued. One of them explained how much she liked being in touch with her constituents, even more so because she, as their representative, was able to do something about the problems they raise:

There is a whole relational part to the work, and I like to meet people... I feel... well... that we can provide help.

Another respondent, a deputy mayor in a district, reflected on the choices that you have to make regarding who can be helped and who can’t. Not being able to deal with everyone’s requests was frustrating for this interviewee:

Our incapacity, yes, to answer everyone’s requests frustrates me. (...) Like on the issue of housing, indeed, the issue of housing is a recurrent problem for young people, especially for young couples, but unfortunately, we are unable to answer everyone’s demand. That is one part of reality, as I said earlier, militants believe that the mayor, or the representatives hold the keys to all houses, they just need to open and give us a key... And as a representative, you realise that things are not like that. Indeed. Well, once you are confronted with this reality... it is sometimes frustrating.

The idea that a representative, who is in close contact with his constituents, has a service function is expressed here. For the group of respondents who spoke about representation in this way, getting in touch with people who ask for their councillors to resolve their personal problems is part of the job.

While the interviews provided no clear-cut answer to the question of who or what the respondents wanted to represent (the general interest or the party and party ideals), there was a strong consensus on the question of what representatives do, or should do: they act. This opportunity to be able to take concrete action appears to be particularly appealing to the interviewees. Furthermore, a group of respondents see it as their duty to resolve the individual problems of their constituents to the extent that they are able to do so.

V. Comparing discourses on representation

The outcomes of the analysis of what or who the respondents wished to represent are summarised in Table 6.5, which, firstly, sets out that ethnic minority councillors usually want to represent the general interest. It also reveals that save in the case of the respondents in the Parisian region in 1992, the interviewees did not wish to represent group interests.
Chapter VI - Conceptions of Representation

Table 6.5: Dominant conceptions of representation in the discourses of the four groups of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amsterdam 1990s</th>
<th>Parisian region 1992</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Party (ideals) or general interest</td>
<td>Group interests (Antillean respondents: ethnic group interests)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amsterdam 2008</td>
<td>Paris 2007-08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General interest</td>
<td>General interest or party (ideals)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These outcomes fit quite well with what was highlighted in Chapter IV: in both France and the Netherlands, the features of the electoral system (the absence of distinct constituencies in particular), and the conception of representation inscribed in law, set a framework within which the dominant notion is that representatives stand and act for the entire population. This is also what the majority of ethnic minority politicians say that they do. As this was observed across time and across cities, there is a strong case for reaching a general conclusion, namely that ethnic minority councillors conform to the dominant discourse in which caring for the general interest is the key duty of representatives.

As ethnic minority representatives have been elected to a greater extent in Amsterdam than in Paris, and since preferential votes can be issued in the Dutch electoral system, one might have expected the desire to represent (ethnic) groups to be present in Amsterdam. Yet, on the contrary, the only circumstance in which the issue of ethnic group representation was expressed and claimed was by the Antillean respondents in the Parisian region in 1992. Accordingly, these practices clearly run counter to what one would have expected given the features of the two structures. Maxwell (2008) has reflected on the specificity of ethnic mobilisation by French Antilleans in his comparison of British and French Caribbean people. He argues that it is precisely the closed political system in France, and the inability of the French structure to cope with ethnicity, that has led French Antilleans to mobilise their Antillean identity as a political resource:

Caribbeans in France have been encouraged to form ethnic and racial-specific national political organizations because they were unable to access visibility and recognition among government officials, affiliation with elected and appointed officials, a role in governance, or the capacity to have their interests represented in public policy either as assimilated citizens or through the broad-based migrant organizations. So, as race and ethnicity have become sources of political disadvantage for Caribbeans in France, those identities have become more likely to be mobilized by national political organizations. (Maxwell, 2008, p.150)

This argument is attractive, and would explain the position of the respondents in Amsterdam. In other words, they did not refer to ethnicity precisely because they are operating in an integrated, open and tolerant political system. But it does not help us in terms of why the other French respondents (those of North-African origin in 1992, and all of the respondents in 2007 and 2008) did not refer to ethnicity when talking about representation. Why did they conform to the dominant discourse? This is probably linked to a factor that is not addressed in the present study, namely the existence of
a well-defined community which the ethnic minority councillors were, or are, in close contact with. From parts of the 1992 interviews, and from Maxwell’s study, it appears that Antillean councillors have strong ties with the Antillean community, but there are fewer such relationships for the other French respondents.

The relationship to the party has been identified in the theoretical chapter as being crucial to understanding the position and the work of representatives in the Western European context. In the previous chapter, we also saw that ethnic minority representatives, especially in the French scenario, maintain interdependent ties with their parties with regard to the development of their political careers. However, this is only partially reflected in what the respondents said about representation. This party representation was, and is, an important issue for the respondents, especially in the case of those in Amsterdam in the early 1990s and the interviewees in Paris in 2007 and 2008. Yet, it seems less significant when it comes to the conclusions of Chapter V. This highlights that, at least in what they say, the respondents make a distinction between their relationship with their party in terms of their political career, and the role of their party when it comes to representation.

The other question that was addressed in this chapter concerns what it is that representatives do. This is, again, clearly framed by the formal and informal rules of the political game in each context. The respondents interviewed in Paris in 2007-08 revealed their insistence on both maintaining contact with constituents in trouble, and their desire to resolve these people’s personal problems. Differences arose when they spoke about the extent to which they believed that they could actually do something to help, but this primarily reflected their position of power in the local hierarchy. The respondents interviewed in Amsterdam in 2008 stressed different types of duties to those referred to by their French counterparts, save for the issue of contact with the population. The control of the executive is a role that is typical of Dutch parliamentary democracy. What the majority of the respondents across the two cities did, however, share was their desire to act. The power attached to the position of councillor – whether real or imagined – has a strong appeal, and it was an incentive for the interviewees to stand in the election. Likewise, their contact with the population was always presented as being an intrinsic part of the role of councillor, despite differences in the kind of contact and the finality thereof.