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Ethnic minorities in local politics: comparing Amsterdam and Paris

Michon, L.B.

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Conclusion

I. Summary of findings

The role of ethnicity in politics is the central question in this dissertation. This is addressed by studying the ethnic minority politicians elected to the local councils of Paris and Amsterdam. More specifically, three aspects were considered: their access to politics, their political careers and their discourses on representation. These factors are studied on the basis of two perspectives: an analysis of contextual features, namely the structure, as well as the practices of individual politicians. The comparative design of the study (with comparisons both over time and across cities) allows for the formulation of general conclusions with regard to the role of ethnicity in politics and also enables me to answer the research questions formulated in Chapter I.

The presentation in Chapter III of the relevant structural features not only reveals how different the two cities of Paris and Amsterdam are, but also the implications of these differences. Amsterdam and Paris do not have a similar status, and nor do they have a comparable role in their national political systems. Indeed, the two cities’ electoral systems differ substantially, leading to dissimilar party systems, and they are also characterised by divergent political cultures. The political system in Amsterdam is typified by both stability and change. The domination of the social-democratic party, the PvdA, along with the stability of the group of important players in the local political arena, means that this city has a stable political system. Nevertheless, the system of pure proportionality, the pluralist party system and the volatility of the electorate all lead to: varying degrees of electoral success, a relative openness towards newcomers (parties and individual politicians) and the perpetually questioned dominance of the leading party in the city.
I argue that these conditions are favourable for newcomers – be it women or ethnic minorities – as they compel parties to constantly appeal to the electorate. Furthermore, the prerogatives of local councillors in the Dutch electoral system, the explicit dualism, and the formally defined tasks provide a solid and interesting base for councillors in the local political arena. Councillors have a status that is derived not only from the process of selection by the political party (which is necessary in order to get elected), but also from the position of councillor itself, which becomes particularly meritorious in the case of an electoral success that is due to winning preferential votes.

In Paris and the Paris region, the stability of the party system is much greater than in Amsterdam. This is particularly due to the electoral rules, with the system of majority vote putting the winning party in a strong position in terms of power, and leaving the opposition with little room for manoeuvre. Two-round elections lead to the formation of two main political blocs – left-wing versus right-wing. The political culture in France in general, and in Paris and its surrounding municipalities in particular, is characterised by a clear hierarchy of power and leads to the concentration of local political power in the hands of the mayor and a few political leaders. The historical picture of electoral results has revealed that parties – and mayors – remain in office for long periods of time. In this system, the access of newcomers to the political arena depends mainly on the good will and strategic decisions of these political leaders. Furthermore, the French political system is characterised by the lack of formal rules relating to the position of local councillors. There is no single answer to the question of what a local councillor in a French municipality does, as there are different positions to be held, depending both on electoral results (it makes a clear difference if one belongs to the majority or to the opposition) and informal processes (which lead to the position of deputy mayor or councillor with a “délégation”). The position – and power – of councillors largely depends on the decisions taken by political leaders, with the mayor being the key official.

Chapter IV focuses on the access that ethnic minorities have to local politics and two comparisons are made, the first of which is a diachronic comparison (in Amsterdam in the early 1990s and 2006), while the second is a synchronic comparison (in Amsterdam and Paris in 2006-2008). The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate both who gets access to local politics – i.e. the sociological profile of elected ethnic minority politicians – and the mechanisms through which this occurs. In Amsterdam, there was a significant increase in the number of ethnic minority councillors elected in the city between 1990 and 2006. Moreover, relatively more women are elected now than was the case in the early 1990s, and the diversity in terms of gender, origin, social-economic background and migration history of the successful ethnic minority candidates has also increased over time. The interviews reveal that while the respondents elected in the early 1990s (composed of young men born abroad, who came to the Netherlands as young adults) have many similarities, those elected in 2006 are very diverse (with women and men of varying ages, both first and second generation immigrants, and individuals with different family backgrounds and histories of migration). The second comparison, between Amsterdam and Paris, reveals that both in absolute and relative terms, more ethnic minority politicians are elected in the former, while, in relative terms, more women are elected in the latter. Despite these differences, there are some similarities among the ethnic minority councillors interviewed in the two cities and over time: all are highly educated and are nationals of their country of residence (even if this is not necessary
in the Netherlands). Furthermore, the individual ethnic and social backgrounds and the histories of migration of the respondents, despite their variety, reveal that these politicians can be regarded as minorities within minorities. In other words, those with an ethnic minority background who get access to the local political elite are in an exceptional position when compared to the majority of the immigrant population. Ethnicity can play a role in access, particularly in the case of the people who have been leading figures in ethnic organisations. Ethnicity is, however, never the explanatory factor in terms of this gaining of access to politics; even when ethnic (positive) discrimination exists, the elite backgrounds of these politicians is crucial. In other words, political recruitment keeps some things constant: level of education, political socialisation, and legitimacy. Other factors, like ethnicity, gender and social background, may vary, and the extent to which this occurs depends on the openness of the political system.

When looking at how the respondents got access to politics, it appears that a large majority of the councillors elected in Amsterdam in 2006 and Paris in 2008 were newly elected: in both cities, the share of incumbent councillors among the ethnic minority groups is limited (the percentage of incumbents ranges between nought on Amsterdam city council in 2006 and 17 percent in the Conseil de Paris in 2008). This may either mean that a new generation of ethnic minority politicians has accessed politics at the same time in both cities, or that the turnover among these councillors is generally high. Indeed, tentative figures reveal that the levels of incumbency of ethnic minority councillors are lower, both in Amsterdam and Paris, than incumbency among councillors overall. Gender plays an important role in access: the presence of female ethnic minority representatives has increased over time, and is important in both Amsterdam and Paris these days. Women appear to have a particular route of access in Paris, with a shorter period of party membership prior to election (compared to men) and greater access to powerful positions. The data from the interviews provides further insight into the process of access, and again highlights both differences and similarities between the two cities.

Many respondents in both contexts (80 to 40%) had been socialised in their country of origin, whereas only a few had also been involved in political activities (especially those elected in Amsterdam). A share of between a third to a half of the respondents, both in Amsterdam and Paris, have parents or close relatives who were politically active. Overall, political socialisation in the country of settlement, or within the family context, is neither an impediment nor a prerequisite for a political career. The access to politics is, however, mainly explained by the fact that the respondents are active citizens, being either long-term and active party members, especially in the Parisian context, and/or being involved in activities within civic organisations. In Paris (and the Paris region), those who get elected have had previous political experiences and a strong partisan engagement. This was less the case in Amsterdam in the early 1990s, but the share of active party members among the ethnic minority councillors did increase over time. More generally, one could say that ethnic minority councillors do not get access to politics “out of the blue.” They feel that they are legitimately able to have a position on the councils.

Chapter V relies on longitudinal data, retracing the political careers of 38 ethnic minority politicians elected in the early 1990s in Amsterdam and the Paris region, of whom 27 were re-interviewed some 15 years later. The careers of the politicians in Amsterdam seem to be very much alike. Political careers are local careers in the Dutch capital: only two of the 23 people interviewed in the early 1990s have gone on to be elected to
another level of government. The more recent interviews have also highlighted that the respondents have simply not stood in elections at other levels of government; their careers were by all means strictly limited to the local political arena. Furthermore, the careers of the respondents are limited in time, with an average period in office of seven years. There does not, however, seem to be a significant difference with regard to the length of time in office between the ethnic minority councillors interviewed and Amsterdam councillors overall. Moreover, the interviews reveal that the limitations in both the length and scope of a career is completely accepted by the respondents; when asked about why and how they left politics, a large majority were perfectly happy with the way things had gone. The impression gained is that local political careers are experienced as a civic engagement at a particular point in one’s life, or, following Weber, such a career is an “avocation” (Weber, 1946 [1921], p.83). So, at some point, it is time “to do something else”, and by this the respondents mean that they resume their professional career. In the case of the interviewees in Paris region, there is more variety in the circumstances of the respondents who were re-interviewed: half of them were (still) elected, and their evaluations of their career also differ. More generally, there were two different types of careers: one that resembles that of their Amsterdam counterparts (politics as an avocation), and another in which the local mandate is just one of the elements of their political work. These latter respondents are active party members with different responsibilities within the party, have stood in many elections (mainly unsuccessfully), and gradually climb up a political ladder that starts at the local level and reaches the height of acquiring national mandates. Using Weber’s terms, these people both live for and strive to live off politics (1946 [1921], p.83). In such a career, frustration and disappointment can easily emerge; politics is an obstacle course, particularly within the party. These differences in how a political career is conceived and conducted can be linked to features of the political system and culture in each context. The open political system that characterises Amsterdam leads to a dispassionate conception of a political career. In contrast, the strongly hierarchical structure of French politics, and the culture of accumulation of political mandates (the accumulation, subsequently, of local, regional and national mandates), are reflected in the aspirations of half of the group of respondents in the Paris region. The comparison between the two cases seems to indicate that the openness of the political system is, thus, negatively correlated to the determination and ambitions of politicians.

In Chapter V, the role played by ethnicity in the course of the respondents’ careers is also examined. There are similarities with respect to this issue; ethnicity may play a role in access, as was also shown in Chapter IV, but its effects are limited when we look at the development of careers. There is, however, one exception: the comparison over time and in two very different contexts makes it clear that when ethnic minority politicians try to attain a position at a higher level of government, it is very likely that they will encounter opposition because of their ethnic background; the argument that their candidacy constitutes the threat of communitarian politics or ethnic nepotism will be used by their opponents. With regard to this issue, the ethnic minority politicians elected in the two different cities have similar experiences; this negative role of ethnicity is, therefore, not linked to particular features of the context.

In Chapter VI, the focus is on the discourses of the respondents, and more particularly on their conceptions of representation. Four groups are compared: two in Amsterdam (in the early 1990s and 2008), one in the Paris region (in 1992) and one
in Paris (in 2007-08). In order to explore the conceptions of representation of these interviewees, grounded coding was used to systematically analyse the references to whom or what the respondents say that they represent. Furthermore, the question of what representation is comprised of – in terms of concrete activities and tasks the respondents identify themselves – has also been explored. This analysis has demonstrated that a basic distinction can be drawn between a general conception of representation (of the entire population or in the name of the general interest) and the representation of group interests. In this last category, a variety of references are combined, but generally two groups can be distinguished: societal groups (ethnic groups, immigrants, or social-economic groups) and the political party. For all of the groups under study, however, two conceptions of representation dominate: the respondents wish to either represent the entire population of the city (or district) or the general interest, or they wish to represent their political party. In other words, the respondents do not make distinctions between those they wish to represent in terms of social-economic features or ethnicity. One group of respondents is, however, atypical in this respect: the Antilleans interviewed in 1992 in the Paris region explicitly put the representation of Antillean interests to the fore. I believe that the reasons for this atypical discourse are two-fold, namely this group's perception that they face discrimination and the existence of a well-defined community with which the Antillean councillors are in close contact. This is not the case for other groups, and explains why we do not see similar comments about ethnic representation being made by the other French respondents. More generally, the representation of the interests of an ethnic group is secondary in what the respondents say. The issue of the representation of the party is particularly interesting, both from a theoretical point of view and because of the outcomes set out in Chapter V. The ties of dependence with the party, especially for the French respondents, are not clearly reflected in their discourses on representation. Accordingly, I argue that when talking about their ties with the party, the respondents make a distinction between, on the one hand, what happens where their political career is concerned and, on the other, this interaction when their function as a representative is at stake.

When looking at what representation is comprised of, there are important differences between the two groups of respondents with whom this issue was addressed (in Amsterdam in 2008 and in Paris in 2007 and 2008). The conceptions reported about what representation involves can be linked to both the formal tasks that councillors have to carry out, and a contextual understanding of what representatives do. There are noticeable differences when contact with the electorate is discussed; in Paris, councillors want to resolve personal problems, while in Amsterdam the belief is that general issues should arise from contact with the population, and making such contact is an obligation.

Most of the research questions have been answered in this summary of findings. We now know who gets access to local politics (a minority within the minorities of active citizens, i.e. an elite) and how they achieve this (they need a source of legitimacy). We also know what political careers they create (politics as an avocation in Amsterdam and both a vocation and an avocation in the Paris region), who and what the politicians wish to represent (the general interest and, ultimately, their party) and how they do this (this relates to their formal tasks and position). The issue of the role of ethnicity has also been addressed with regard to each of these matters and, generally, appears to be limited and marginal.
However, the answers to the different research questions still need to be linked to each other, while the implications thereof must also be considered and more general conclusions drawn. A first issue to be addressed here concerns the link between the practices distinguished in the different chapters. In other words, how are the sociological profile of the ethnic minority councillors (gender, education, family background, socialisation, history of migration), their routes to being elected, the patterns of their political careers, and their discourses on representation related to each other? The answer is that a clear logic or coherence between these different elements cannot actually be identified, save for in the case of the councillors interviewed in the early 1990s in Amsterdam. These politicians—by and large—share a similar sociological profile and their political careers are also very much alike. This group of newcomers (young men born abroad with little political experience) with easy—almost passive—access to politics not only fit relatively smoothly into the local political arena, but also left it after a few years without remorse or regrets. However, there appears to be no link between their profiles, their access, and the development of their careers on the one hand, and their conceptions of representation—which differ—on the other. The results for the other groups of respondents are even more puzzling. To put it in a different way, we cannot predict from their sociological profile how these people get access to politics, what their careers have been after their first election, and what they say about representation. Despite the variety of features, practices, experiences and elements of the structure examined here, a general logic in terms of recruitment and representation does not emerge from this study. Indeed, if such logic exists, and is to be found in further research, I believe that it must be assessed via a comparison between ethnic minority and native councillors, with the decisions made by the party and party leaders also being examined.

In what remains of this conclusion, I will, therefore, focus on two issues: the roles of structures and ethnicity in politics. The first issue concerns the links between the two perspectives utilised in this study. Although we have seen that, at some points and for some mechanisms, the structure is of crucial importance, the role it played in other matters was less clear. The final section of this conclusion will deal with the role of ethnicity in politics. Again, different pieces of a puzzle have been highlighted in the previous chapters and this summary of findings, but these need to be considered together to answer the study's central question.

**II. The role of structures**

In Chapter I, I explained how the present study considers both the attention paid to features of the opportunity structure in each city as well as individual practices. Previous research into the political mobilisation of ethnic minorities (Bousetta, 2001; Garbaye, 2005; Ireland, 1994; Odmalm, 2005) have shown that the institutional setting of a given (local) context sets out a framework of what is or is not possible and, consequently, orientates the mechanisms of the political participation of these individuals. I, therefore, expected that the features of the electoral system, the party system and the political culture in Amsterdam would lead to members of ethnic minority groups having greater ease of access to local politics there than would be the case in Paris. This was certainly
confirms the figures presented in Chapter IV: many more ethnic minority councillors are elected in the former than in the latter.

The relative openness of the political arena in Amsterdam is also reflected in the way in which ethnic minority politicians gain access to politics. The data concerning the political experiences of the respondents prior to their election reveals that the political system in Amsterdam is indeed more open to outsiders than is the case in Paris; long-term and/or active engagement within a party is seen more often in Paris than in Amsterdam, while activities within civic organisations are regarded as a legitimate route to a political mandate more often in Amsterdam than in Paris. Furthermore, when we look at the political socialisation of the respondents, it appears that in Amsterdam in the early 1990s (and to a lesser extent in 2006), political socialisation and involvement in political activities in the country of origin were by no means impediments to a political career. In Paris, however, only one respondent had been politically active in the country of origin. This again highlights the relative openness of the political arena in Amsterdam when compared to the French capital.

These differences relate to the opportunities that ethnic minority individuals have to become part of the local political elite, and we can see that the orientation provided by the opportunity structure is reflected in individual practices. This is also the case when we look at the development of political careers. There is a dominant career path among the ethnic minority politicians elected in Amsterdam in the early 1990s, with these careers being limited in time and scope. This pattern is not, however, specific to ethnic minority councillors; the high frequency of elections (every four years) and the average length of a local political career both point to a more general framework in Dutch politics. The role of the local political opportunity structure is less clear-cut in the case of the respondents in the Paris region (interviewed in 1992 and re-interviewed in 2007), since two different patterns of political careers emerge. One of these, which is built on the commitment to a political party and a goal to climb a ladder of political mandates, seems to be most clearly linked to the structural features of the Paris region. The French and Parisian political structure is characterised by strong hierarchical lines, the accumulation of political mandates and a dependence on party leaders. The second type of political career (careers that are limited to the local level) is, however, more difficult to relate to our expectations, which are based on these structural features, and does not, therefore, support the notion of there being a strong link between the two.

Finally, we can also see differences between the respondents in Amsterdam and those in Paris with regard to what they say about representation, or, more precisely, in terms of the definition of what representation involves. This difference can be traced to the formal duties and prerogatives that the councillors have: in the Dutch electoral and political systems, the council is clearly separate from the executive and must control it, while in the French context, the council and the executive are as one, and the duties of individual councillors depend upon the position and prerogatives allocated by the mayor.

The comparison of access to politics, the development of political careers and the discourses of the ethnic minority councillors elected in Amsterdam, Paris and its region, thus, reveals differences which can be understood from the perspective of the differences between the local and national structures. Nevertheless, although we can see tendencies – by comparison there is more of this in Paris and more of that in Amsterdam – we cannot see entirely different patterns of practices. This lack of distinctive patterns
is further confirmed by the fact that the practices observed (the process of access, the development of careers and the discourses on representation, contrasted with the sociological profile of the politicians) are not consistent with each other, as was explained above.

Moreover, there are some striking similarities to be found in the comparison between the two contexts. One of these concerns the sociological profile of the ethnic minority councillors. In Chapter IV we have seen that with their high level of education, family background, histories of migration and activities in their country of residence, these councillors, whatever the time or place, are in an elite position (either by descent or their own efforts). I have argued above that it is this elite position that favours the access of these individuals to the local political arena – it is not enough on its own, but it is necessary. The fact that all of the respondents were nationals of their country of residence prior to their election, even though this is not necessary in the Netherlands, also highlights the desire of these ethnic minority elites to integrate.

Another strong similarity arises when we look at what the respondents say about representation. Despite differences in the discourses about what representation involves as an activity, what is said about whom or what one represents is quite similar. In all cases we see a tendency to combine different conceptions of representation, but with two dominant notions to the fore: one that focuses on the general interest and one that links representation to a political party. The representation of the interests of ethnic groups is a subsidiary matter for these respondents, and is often combined with a more general goal of the defence of the general interest.

Finally, overall, the role that ethnicity plays in the practices under scrutiny is limited in both Amsterdam and Paris. Notwithstanding the differences in local and national political opportunity structures when it comes to issues of migration and integration (differences that are highlighted in previous studies; Guiraudon, 2000; Ireland, 1994; Koopmans & Statham, 2000), there are no clear differences when it comes to the role of ethnicity in the practices and discourses of the ethnic minority councillors. Ethnicity might play a role in access – more so in Amsterdam in the early 1990s than for any other group of respondents – but this is not a determining factor. Moreover, ethnicity does not appear to play a role in the development of the respondents’ political careers, even if it can be used as an argument against them when they try to advance to another political level. Indeed, in the discourses on representation, ethnicity does not appear to have a significant role to play, and, to the extent to which it is addressed by the respondents, they prefer to ignore this issue as far as possible.

Overall, the present study reveals that while local and national structures are influential in some areas, and to some extent, they fail to provide a general explanation. Various mechanisms –which pertain to some of the central questions in this study: who gets access to politics? Who or what do ethnic minority representatives represent? What is the role of ethnicity? – fit into a broader scheme. Structures do matter, but it must be clarified which structures matter in which way. Following Sartori (1970, p.1040), we must go up the “ladder of abstraction” in order to refine our explanatory scheme. I have used Easton’s definition of systemic properties (“aggregate characteristics of a system”, “states of the political system” and “institutional patterns”; Easton, 1990, p. 141) in order to define the features of the local political opportunity structure studied in Chapter III. However, structural mechanisms that are not linked to the particular features of Amsterdam and
Paris as an electoral, political and partisan context are present as well. Looking at the differences and similarities between the practices observed across time and space, we can highlight the role of two other structural mechanisms that are at play: the functioning of elites and the workings of representative democracy. Amsterdam and Paris share a similar political system; they are both representative democracies. Furthermore, the basic ways of working of the political elites and their recruitment also seem to be similar in the two cities. From the point of view of these more general structural mechanisms, Amsterdam and Paris are, consequently, more alike than one might imagine on the basis of the features of their electoral and party systems. The different mechanisms addressed in this study are summarised and schematised in Figure 7.1.

The purpose of this work is to understand access to a political career, the development of political careers and discourses on representation for ethnic minority politicians across time and space. For the sake of the argument, I bundle these elements together in Figure 7.1 as being the practices of representatives. Accordingly, I will now focus on the factors that frame and influence these practices and the relationship between them: representative democracy, the (local) institutional opportunity structure, political recruitment and political parties.

Figure 7.1: The influence of structures on ethnic minority representatives’ practices
In Figure 7.1, all of the relationships between the different elements seem to be the equivalent of each other. This figure, thus, serves as a summary of the different elements that have been highlighted in this study. In reality, however, these factors do not have an equal impact on the practices of representatives; their relative weight can, therefore, only be posited hypothetically here, with further research needed to test the explanatory value of this combination of factors.

The system of representative democracy, firstly, entails government by the people (democracy), albeit indirectly through the intermediary of elected bodies (representation). Although the way in which people are represented in elected bodies and the extent to which the elected bodies govern differs substantially from one political system to another, there are some common mechanisms. In the first place, representation involves there being a particular link between a representative and those represented (arrow 2). This is characterised by a relationship of responsibility, accountability, expectations from the electorate, and listening to and/or getting help from the representatives (arrow 9). This relationship between representative and electorate is mediated by features of the political system (arrow 5). Secondly, the comparison conducted in Chapter VI has revealed the particular position that parties play in the act of representation (arrow 10). As has been argued by other scholars, in Western European democracies parties mediate the relationship between elected politicians and the electorate (Dalton, 1996, p.255). Both mechanisms are at play, whatever the particular local context of the representatives.

The system of representative democracy influences the pattern of political recruitment, as does the local and national institutional setting (arrows 1 and 3): the functioning of representative democracy dictates what representatives do (and, thus, why they are recruited), while the institutional setting influences how many positions are open for recruitment and how the recruitment process may evolve. Political recruitment does, however, appear to have an autonomous role as well (arrow 7). We have seen in Chapter I that comparative studies have highlighted the similarity and persistence of the sociological features of political elites in modern democracies; they are predominantly composed of highly educated men from a high social-economic background (Putnam, 1976, p.22-23; Lagroye et al., 2002, p.468). However, there is a limit to the reproduction of elites, as Pareto has observed and prophesised: there is no example of an elite that has perpetually reproduced itself (“aristocracies do not last”, Pareto, 1983 [1935], p.1430). This mechanism of persistence, along with renewal, is illustrated by the present study; with regard to the issue of their level of education and, to some extent, political socialisation in the family context and their social-economic background, ethnic minority councillors conform to the dominant profile of political elites in general. They are, however, newcomers, to the extent that they were born abroad, have often been socialised abroad and are generally not incumbents.

Representatives’ practices are further influenced by the (local) institutional setting (arrow 4), as has been highlighted at several points and also recalled above: the level of access to politics, the development of political careers and the work that representatives do are framed by it. Parties again play a mediating role here; careers depend on the opportunities offered within parties and the ability of politicians to use the party’s instruments to achieve a political position.

Parties also play a mediating role when one looks at the impact that political recruitment has on the practices of representatives (arrows 6 and 8), since they play a
leading role in the selection of political elites. As was recalled in Chapter VI, they make “the choice before the choice” (Rahat, 2007, p.157). In addition, as was highlighted in the Introduction and Chapter IV, politicians – whatever their ethnicity – are extremely, if not fully, dependent on parties for their access to the political arena (arrow 8). Finally, when analysing the discourses on representation, we have seen that many respondents feel that they are the representatives of a party and the party’s voters.

Overall, there are two clusters of issues – and related factors and influences – when looking at Figure 7.1. One of these revolves around the issue of political careers, while the other concerns the issue of representation. As far as the first matter is concerned, it is the particular interplay between the process of political recruitment, the workings of political parties and the practices of individual politicians that come into play. When it comes to the second issue, the relationship between representatives and the electorate is crucial, and is mediated and influenced by multiple factors. In each case, the system of representative democracy and the (local) institutional structure frame and orientate individual practices.

III. The role of ethnicity

The concluding remarks of this final chapter concern the overarching question of this study, namely what is the role of ethnicity in politics? We have seen above that ethnicity is at play at some points and in certain ways. Firstly, it may play a role in the access that ethnic minority politicians have to the local political arena. In Amsterdam in the 1990s, it clearly was an asset for those wishing to obtain a position on the electoral lists. In the other cases under study, however, the influence that ethnicity has on political access is less clear-cut. One thing is, nonetheless, made apparent by the comparisons: ethnicity is neither a necessary nor an adequate reason for individuals to get access to politics.

In the development of political careers, the role of ethnicity seems to be more limited. It hardly ever comes into play for politicians who remain at the local level and does not appear to influence the decision to pursue or end a political career. It does, however, come into the picture when people try to reach for a higher level on the political ladder, when it is then used as an argument to block or hinder this upward trajectory.

In the discourses on representation, ethnicity is hardly mentioned. The respondents do not feel that they represent an ethnic group and mainly want to avoid being seen as such a representative. Looking at what the politicians believe to be involved in being a representative, ethnicity does not come into the picture either. The contact that the respondents have with the electorate, and the interests they want to promote, are not tied to ethnicity, but are instead understood in more general terms, or are linked to the political party.

The role of ethnicity, thus, seems to be mainly imposed by external factors. In most circumstances, the respondents do not wish to see their origin play a role at all, but they do have to deal with the fact that the political party and/or (parts of) the electorate believe that ethnicity is an important issue (whether it is seen as a positive thing or a threat to universal values is another matter). One group of respondents could be singled out in the analysis because of the role ethnicity plays for them, namely the Antillean
interviewees in 1992 in the Paris region. Their ability to both adopt this approach and profit from ethnicity as a political resource does, however, seem to be limited in a context that does not value this feature in politics (Maxwell, 2008).

Two dimensions, thus, emerge from the comparison of the role that ethnicity plays in politics in Amsterdam and Paris: the ethnic identity ascribed by the environment and the role of ethnicity in the respondents’ sense of self-identification. On both dimensions ethnicity can be seen as: a positive feature, a negatively loaded element, or irrelevant. When cutting across these two dimensions and their expression, various situations appear that are set out in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1: The role of ethnicity in politics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity in political self-identification</th>
<th>Ethnicity as an ascribed political identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepted/claimed ethnic identification</td>
<td>Incongruent discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incongruent ethnic assertion</td>
<td>Incongruent ethnic assertion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Inflicted ethnic identification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejection of ethnicity</td>
<td>Universalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irrelevant</td>
<td>Ascribed ethnic identification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>Universalism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In a situation where ethnicity is valued in the political process by parties and the electorate, three possibilities arise based on the way in which individual ethnic minority representatives relate to the role of their ethnicity in their political activities. These politicians may equally value ethnicity as part of their political identity, and ethnicity is accepted by all actors as an important political factor (cell 1: accepted or claimed ethnic identification). Such politicians may not, however, see their ethnic background as an issue that matters politically, in which case they will feel that an ethnic identity is imposed upon them (cell 2: inflicted ethnic identification). The third possibility is that these politicians do not care whether their ethnic background plays a role in their political activities or not, but since the environment sees it as a valuable matter, a particular identity is imposed upon them (cell 3: ascribed ethnic identification).

If, however, belonging to an ethnic minority group is negatively loaded, because parties and the electorate do not want ethnicity to play a role in politics, ethnic minority representatives will face three different scenarios. If these politicians value their ethnic background as a crucial matter in his political activities, the tension between their views and those of their environment leads to incongruent discrimination (cell 4). If, on the contrary, they reject the idea that ethnicity plays a role in politics, then, like their environment, the situation is clear: ethnicity is discarded in the political process (cell 5: rejection of ethnicity). Yet another possibility is that these politicians are discriminated against on the basis of a characteristic that they deem to be unimportant (cell 6: discrimination).

The final option from the viewpoint of the environment of the ethnic minority representatives is that the party and the electorate do not care about ethnicity in politics.
In this case, and if the politicians themselves do value their ethnic background in their political activities, they will be crying in the wilderness, asserting the role of ethnicity while those around them are indifferent to it (cell 7: incongruent ethnic assertion). If these politicians do not want ethnicity to play a role in politics, or if they do not care whether or not it does, then everything points in the same direction: ethnicity is irrelevant in politics (cells 8 and 9: universalism).

Of the eight possible ways in which ethnicity plays a role in the political arena (the eight different cells in Table 7.1), four have been observed in the present study. The interviews conducted in the 1990s in Amsterdam demonstrate that the respondents’ environment ascribed an ethnic identity to them (mainly in positive terms: diversity was seen as a necessity and an enrichment of political elites and their activities), while they themselves did not particularly define who they are in terms of their ethnic identity, or saw it as something that could enrich their political activities. Therefore, for this group in the early 1990s in Amsterdam, a situation of ascribed ethnic identification prevailed.

In the Paris region in 1992, ethnicity was not an issue for the external actors, but the Antillean respondents mobilised it as a crucial marker of political identity and a basis for political engagement. Other respondents did, however, vehemently refuse to see ethnicity as a relevant political matter, or instead saw it as being irrelevant. Incongruent ethnic assertion, thus, pertains for the group of Antillean respondents, while for the others, universalism characterises the situation.

The more recent interviews in Paris have many similarities with the situation in Amsterdam in the 1990s, with an environment that values ethnic diversity and also demonstrates forms of positive action towards ethnic minorities, and a group of respondents who see their ethnic identity as something that is largely irrelevant for their political identification. Ascribed ethnic identification would, therefore, define the situation in Paris in 2007/2008. Nevertheless, the universalist discourse that is still very present in France influences the extent to which positive discrimination is practiced (except in the case of women).

Finally, for those respondents interviewed in Amsterdam in 2008, an ambivalent situation prevailed. Only a few felt that their ethnic background played a part within their party, but some did mention that it came into play during the electoral campaign. Primarily, the respondents seemed to have a great deal of say in the extent to which they wanted their ethnic background to play a role in politics. The attitude of both the respondents and their external environment thus oscillated between the positive and neutral approach to the role of ethnicity in politics, i.e. between accepted ethnic identification and universalism.

To conclude, this study provides examples of situations in which the environment considers the role of ethnicity in politics to be either irrelevant or positive, and in which ethnic minority politicians themselves also mainly see their ethnic background in the same way. Neither the parties and the electorate nor the politicians themselves seem to fully reject the notion that ethnicity plays a role in politics. This must, however, be linked to a conclusion drawn above: by and large, the role of ethnicity in politics is limited. The stakes are thus not very high, and this might explain why ethnicity in politics is not disallowed. This is, though, a matter for further research, which should concentrate more specifically on contrasting scenarios in which ethnicity is an ascribed negative identity with situations in which its role in politics is accepted.

Cutting across the ascription of ethnicity by the external environment, and the
mobilisation of ethnicity by the politicians themselves, is a way to reflect upon the interaction between structure and practices. Looking at the role of ethnicity from this perspective again reveals that while the structure is important (in the definition used initially in this study), it does not provide a completely satisfactory answer to the central research question. In fact, the role that ethnicity plays in politics depends on three types of factors: structural features, strategies, and the practices of political actors (the party and the electorate), and the strategies and practices of individual ethnic minority politicians.