Ethnic minorities in local politics: comparing Amsterdam and Paris

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Summary

This dissertation is about ethnic minority politicians in the local political arena and the role of ethnicity in politics. It compares three aspects of ethnic minority representation at the local level, namely the access that ethnic minority councillors have to local politics, the development of their political careers and their conceptions of representation. This is done across two cities (Amsterdam and Paris) and over time (comparing the early 1990s and the present situation).

The reason why this issue is addressed lies in the potential tension that arises from the fact that on the one hand, descriptive representation appears to be a necessity if democracies are to abide by the principles of legitimacy and representation, but on the other, it seems as if representatives’ individual features raise suspicions about the ability of politicians to strive for the common good. In Western European politics, this is mainly the case for ethnic minority politicians. They are particularly vulnerable because their visibility as “others” turns them into outsiders almost by definition, and leads to them being questioned about who and what they actually represent. Precisely because their origins, the colour of their skin, and the sound of their name are features they cannot escape, it is difficult for such individuals to avoid questions about the potential tension between their visible belonging to an ethnic group and the practice of representation. From this perspective, one might argue that ethnicity automatically plays a role in politics. However, we do not know if this is indeed always the case. Furthermore, it is not yet clear how individual features, like one’s ethnic background, have a part to play in politics, and, if they do, what this part actually is.

The question of the role of ethnicity in politics is addressed on the basis of the notion that two perspectives must be studied and confronted: first, how is the role of ethnicity in politics dealt with by features of the electoral system, the political system and the political culture of a given context; and second, what are the practices of individuals on the ground? The necessity of confronting both perspectives, which following de Certeau (1980) I call the structure and the practices, stems from the observation that the commonly followed line of explanation, namely that the institutional setting of a country or city determines why and how ethnic minority politicians get access to politics, has a number of flaws. Indeed, institutional factors cannot fully account for a number of phenomena, and the differences that can be noted between ethnic groups in the same city in terms of their access to politics and their participation therein is one of these. More generally, I believe that because of the dominance of the institutionalist approach, too little attention has been paid to individual choices and strategies. I argue that the clues about the participation of ethnic minorities in local politics do not only reside in the framing role of local institutional settings, but also in the ways in which individuals make these frames their own and enrich them with their actions. This perspective provides the opportunity to look into the differences in access to politics and the development of political careers within one country, among ethnic groups and across individuals. It also enables me to examine the elements of ethnic minority representatives’ political lives.
that are generally disregarded (the development of their political careers and their exit from politics).

On the basis of a discussion of the literature on access to politics, political careers and representation (Chapter I), a number of key debates arise which guide the present study. As the existing literature has highlighted that political elites are rather homogeneous (composed of highly educated white men; Putnam, 1976), it seems necessary to examine who, among ethnic minority groups, gets access to politics; i.e. to what extent do they conform to the dominant sociological profile of political elites? The knowledge gained on women, a group that has been traditionally excluded from politics, is interesting in this regard, helping the formulation of ideas about how people get access to the political arena and what prior socialisation and experience is needed. This example also leads to scrutiny of the elements of the structure that hinder or, on the contrary, facilitate the access of newcomers to politics, namely features of the electoral system, the political system and the functioning of political parties in particular. As far as the issue of the development of political careers is concerned, the typology produced by Weber, who distinguishes between politicians for whom politics is a vocation and those for whom it is an avocation (Weber, 1946 [1921]), is particularly fruitful, as it helps us to understand the role that the different elements of people’s careers play (time spent in office, different mandates held, responsibilities within the party, etc.). In addition, as these different elements are tied to the structural features of each context, the influence of the electoral system and the workings of parties must be considered as well. Finally, the question of who or what is being represented is at the core of the analysis of the respondents’ discourse. This is a key question in the debates on representation, as it relates to the issue of the role of representatives’ personal features in their work and the controversy of general interest versus group interest representation (see Pitkin, 1972). The focus here lies on the extent to which politicians wish to represent specific groups (and, ultimately, their ethnic group) and/or their party. This can be contrasted with the dominant conceptions of representation (linked to the features of the electoral system) and the ties between political parties and those elected on their behalf.

This dissertation mainly relies on interviews which have been conducted with ethnic minority councillors both in the early 1990s and more recently (see Chapter II). In Amsterdam, 23 interviews were held in 1990 and 1994, while 15 took place in the region of Paris in 1992. Most of the people interviewed at that time have been re-interviewed more recently (respectively 16 and 11). Furthermore, a new series of interviews was conducted with ethnic minority councillors currently holding a seat on a council in either Amsterdam (15 interviews) or Paris (17 interviews). The interviews conducted in Amsterdam form the basis of a comparison of similarities and changes over time within a similar context (a so-called “most similar systems design”, Przeworski & Teune, 1970), while the comparison of the interviews conducted in Amsterdam and Paris provides an opportunity to analyse access to politics, the development of careers and discourses on representation in different contexts and across time (i.e. a “most different systems design”; idem).

The analysis of the structural features of Amsterdam and Paris (Chapter III) reveals that there are many differences between the two cities when it comes to the electoral system, the political system, the role of migration and the inclusion of newcomers in politics. The political system in Amsterdam is characterised by: its system of pure proportionality, a
pluralist party system, and the volatility of the electorate. These factors lead to: political parties having fluctuating electoral successes, the perpetually questioned dominance of the leading party in Amsterdam, the social-democratic party, the PvdA, and a relative openness towards newcomers (parties and individual politicians). 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 formally defined tasks, provide a solid and interesting position for councillors in the local political system. In contrast, the stability of the party system in Paris is much stronger than in Amsterdam. This is due to specific features of the electoral system: the system of majority vote, which puts the winning party in a strong position of power, and the two-round elections that lead to the formation of two main political blocs – left-wing versus right-wing. The political culture in the French capital is also 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. In this system, the access of newcomers depends mainly on the good will and strategic decisions of these political leaders. Likewise, the position and power of councillors largely depends on the decisions taken by political leaders, with the mayor being the most important official in this regard.

Given these very different contexts, what practices can we observe in terms of the access that ethnic minority members get to the local political arena, the development of their political careers and their discourses on representation? In Chapter IV, a dual comparison of ethnic minority access to local politics is conducted in the form of a diachronic comparison (in Amsterdam in the early 1990s and 2006) and a synchronic comparison (in Amsterdam and Paris in 2006-2008). While changes can be observed over time in Amsterdam (an increasing diversity in terms of gender, origin, social-economic background and migration history), and although differences come to the fore in the comparison between Amsterdam and Paris (more ethnic minority politicians are elected in Amsterdam but more women are elected in Paris), there are also some important similarities. In both cities and over time, all ethnic minority councillors are highly educated and are nationals of their country of residence (even if this is not necessary in the Netherlands). Furthermore, these politicians are in an exceptional position when compared to the majority of the immigrant population, even before they enter the political arena. This elite background is crucial; even when ethnic (positive) discrimination exists, ethnicity is never the only reason why people entered the political arena. Access to politics is mainly explained by the fact that these respondents are active citizens. They are either long-term and active party members and/or have undertaken activities within civic organisations. This triggers their sense that they are legitimately able to have a position on the council.

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, 27 of whom were re-interviewed some fifteen years later. These interviews reveal that for those interviewed in Amsterdam, their political careers were restricted to the local level and limited in time. Furthermore, this limitation, both in time and scope, is fully accepted by the respondents: when asked about why and how they left politics, a large majority was perfectly happy about the way things had gone. The impression gathered from these facts is that local political careers are experienced as a civic engagement at a particular point in
one's life, or, following Weber, they are an “avocation” (Weber, 1946 [1921], p.83). In the case of the respondents in the Paris region, two types of careers can be observed: one that resembles that of their Amsterdam counterparts (politics as avocation) and another in which the respondents are active party members with different responsibilities within their party, have stood in many elections, and gradually climb up the political ladder (or try to). Using Weber’s terminology, these people live for and strive to live off politics (idem). In such a career, frustration and disappointment can easily emerge; politics is an obstacle course, in particular within the party. The comparison between the two cases seems to indicate that the openness of the political system is negatively correlated to the determination and ambitions of politicians. It also demonstrates that when ethnic minority politicians try to move on to 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 a threat of communitarian politics or ethnic nepotism will be used by these politicians’ opponents.

In Chapter VI, and to examine their conceptions of representation, the discourses of four groups of respondents were analysed through grounded coding (those interviewed in Amsterdam in the early 1990s and 2008, in the Paris region in 1992, and in Paris in 2007-08). This analysis has revealed 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 the four groups of respondents under study, both the general conception of representation and the representation of the political party are the most common. Representation is, thus, in the discourse of the respondents, something that is separate from divisions within society – in the general conception of representation – and/or is conducted in the name of a political party and political ideals. The representation of the interests of an ethnic group is a subsidiary issue in what the respondents say, except for the group of Antilleans interviewed in 1992 in the Paris region. The other issue addressed in this chapter concerns what representation involves; the conceptions reported on this matter can be clearly linked to the formal tasks that the councillors in each city have to carry out.

In summary, this dissertation reveals which ethnic minority politicians get access to local politics (a minority within minorities of active citizens, i.e. an elite) and how they achieve this (they need a source of legitimacy). It also provides an answer to the question of what political careers these politicians create (politics as an avocation in Amsterdam; both a vocation and an avocation in the Paris region). Finally, this work also demonstrates that these politicians wish to represent the general interest and, in some cases, their party, as well as revealing that how they take on the role of representative relates to their formal tasks and position. Overall, the analysis of these three types of practices reveals that the role of ethnicity is limited and marginal. It may come into play in terms of gaining access to politics, but is not a determining factor. Moreover, ethnicity does not appear to play a role in the development people’s careers, even if it can be used as an argument against them when they try to advance to another political level. Indeed, to the extent to which ethnicity is addressed by the respondents in their discourses on representation, they prefer to minimise this issue as far as possible.
More generally, the outcomes of this dissertation lead to arguments on two issues: the interaction between structure and practices and the role of ethnicity in politics. On the first matter, the study touches upon the claim that the local and national political opportunity structures determine individual practices on the ground. It is revealed 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? – do not fit into this explanatory scheme. Indeed, structural mechanisms other than the particular features of Amsterdam or Paris as an electoral, political and partisan context appear 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 are both representative democracies and 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.

With regard to the central issue of this dissertation, namely the role of ethnicity, it seems as if this is mainly imposed by external factors. In most circumstances, the respondents do not wish to see their origin play a part 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). Two dimensions, thus, emerge: 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. 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. However, since the role of ethnicity in politics largely appears to be limited, the stakes are not very high. This explains why ethnicity in politics is not disallowed.