

# **Review: Democratic Institutions and Long-Term Action: Exploring the Institutional Antecedents of Presentism and Intergenerational Justice (PhD by Daan Vermassen, Vrije Universiteit Brussel)**

Karen Celis\*

“Representative democracies, at least in their current form, are notorious for their bias towards *the present* and their lack of consideration of *the future*” (Vermassen, 2023, p. 1, emphasis added). Daan’s PhD deals with democratic short-termism or democratic myopia, one of the key challenges that many, if not all, contemporary democracies face. In response to the threat to intergenerational justice, democratic innovations are put in place to secure the rights of future generations. Similar to the institutional responses to representational problematics of historically disadvantaged groups such as women or ethnic/racialised minorities, solutions are underpinned by a logic of presence. In the case of unborn generations, for obvious reasons, this presence cannot be physical; it is rather engendered through *representation*, in some form or another, of their interests. This, then, begs questions such as: what are the interests of the ‘future represented’? Are some interests more important than others? How to decide?

Daan’s first contribution to the scholarship in this field is the acceptance of these questions as unanswerable, and pointing the way out of this dilemma. In shifting focus from policy

*outcome*, to *policy process* and *representative claims*, Daan valorises the potential of current representative actors to augment the intergenerational justice of the process, for instance, through performing surrogate representation for the unborn. Although the empirical findings are on the negative side – representative claims for future generations are scarce and poorly justified – the analysis also shows there is a set of critical actors, that is, a group of representatives that is highly motivated and engaged in future generation representation. Highly interesting in that regard is then the hypothesis that because the Belgian Senate is not directly elected – and, by consequence, less exposed to the electoral incentives for short-termism – it would be outperforming the Chamber of Representatives in the representation of future generations. Although not confirmed – the Senate is *not* inhabited in greater numbers by critical actors for the unborn –, the hypothesis, and the way it is tested, is something future researchers will build from. A third contribution that deserves highlighting is Daan’s highly original analysis of what decision-makers *themselves* identify as the key barriers to long-term policymaking. Regarding the latter, Vermassen’s research does not come to conclusive

\* Karen Celis, Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

results, yet it does identify three strong drivers of long-term decision-making: government composition, proportionality and civic participation.

Overall, Daan's PhD serves the community of students and practitioners of democracy in two key ways. It first contributes to – but importantly also sets an empirical research agenda for – scholarship on the existing actors and institutions of representative democracy, identifying who and what enables representation of the future generations' interests. A limitation of Daan's PhD that can be addressed here is the role of ideologies in the representation of the unborn. Secondly, Daan's work provides key insights, and again an important agenda for re-designing existing intuitions, and for designing new innovations for augmenting intergenerational justice in our current democracies. A lacuna Daan leaves for future generations of researchers is a conversation with the gender and politics scholarship as the latter has extensively dealt with the principles of democratic innovation that Daan foregrounds, such as institutional obligation to ensure inclusion.