

PhD SUMMARY

Minority voting and representation

The impact of religion, migration background and gender on voter preferences for in- and out-group politicians in France, Germany and the Netherlands

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The political representation of historically marginalised and minoritised groups is far from straightforward. The presence of politicians from disadvantaged groups in parliament does not directly lead to the representation of their interests, nor feeling represented — often referred to as the connection between descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation, respectively (Pitkin, 1967). Turning the focus to feelings of representation (Saward, 2010), I studied in-group voting in France, Germany and the Netherlands by asking how voters react to diversity in politics.

In a meta-analysis, I re-analysed all studies that ran experiments testing how voters react to women and racial/ethnic minorities running for office, including their theoretical frameworks (van Oosten et al., 2024a). I identified two main schools of thought: voters use either “unjust” or “useful” stereotypes. “Unjust” stereotypes are negative associations that voters might have of women and minority politicians: that they are weak or lazy, for instance. “Useful” stereotypes are expectations of policy positions that women and Black politicians might have: that they are pro-redistribution and equality, to name a few. Useful stereotypes help voters make decisions in low-information settings because voters infer policy positions from the gender and race/ethnicity of political candidates (idem).

After re-analysing all existing data of candidate experiments, I concluded that voters do not discriminate against politicians of colour, mostly based on US data (idem). In Europe, I also found that voters do not discriminate against women and politicians with a migration background, though they discriminate heavily against Muslim politicians *and* politicians who stand for pro-Muslim policies, irrespective of

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whether they are Muslim (van Oosten, 2024a). However, the discrimination against Muslim politicians disappears completely when Muslim politicians explicitly distance themselves from Muslim rights, which I call *broadstancing* (van Oosten, 2024b). Voters were, thus, very negative about Muslim politicians with the fear in mind that these Muslim politicians would advance the rights of Muslims, though, when a Muslim politician distances themselves from their group and vows not to propagate Muslim interests, they are treated like any other politician making the same claims (idem). Policy stereotypes are thus the most important reasons why voters discriminate against Muslims. Voters use identity as a proxy for policy.

Voters know this (idem), party elites know this (Dancygier, 2017), minority politicians know this (Stephens-Dougan, 2020), but do all voters use identity as a proxy for policy in the same way? After pre-registration (van Oosten, 2020) and data collection (van Oosten et al., 2024b, 2024c, 2024d), I researched whether voters expect Muslim politicians to oppose same-sex adoption and found that, generally, they do (van Oosten, 2022). However, this finding was not consistent across all groups of voters. Voters who were themselves the most progressive on gay rights actually did not stereotype Muslim politicians in that way. Voters with lukewarm feelings about gay rights, were the most likely to stereotype Muslim politicians. Voters with an egalitarian worldview tend to extend that view towards all groups, whether they be Muslim, Christian or non-religious (idem).

Within this political context, how do Muslim voters make sense of political representation? In my survey, of which all data is accessible online (van Oosten et al., 2024b, 2024c, 2024d), I sampled 3,058 citizens of France, Germany and the Netherlands with an oversample of citizens with a first- or second generation migration background in Turkey (386, all countries), North-Africa/Morocco (440, France, the Netherlands), Sub-Saharan Africa (162, France), the Former Soviet Union (266, Germany), Surinam (251, the Netherlands) as well as those without a migration background, and/or those who self-identify as Muslim, Christian or non-religious.

With these oversamples, I studied whether women, minority, and Muslim voters prefer in-group candidates and found only limited evidence in support of this (van Oosten, 2024a). In fact, I find that non-religious voters show more in-group favouritism than Muslim voters do (Nadler et al., 2025). Muslim voters only really prefer Muslim politicians clearly in the Netherlands, not in France and Germany. In the Netherlands, I also studied Muslim's propensity to vote for DENK, a Dutch political party representing mostly Muslim politicians and the interests of Muslims. Voting for DENK is predicted by the wish to see Muslim interests represented (van Oosten et al., 2024e). But do Muslim voters also use identity as a proxy for policy? No, Muslim voters do not have very clear expectations of Muslim politicians. Muslim voters are very negative about *all* politicians who are against Muslim rights, but do not distinguish between Muslim and non-Muslim politicians making these same claims (van

Oosten, 2024b). Muslim voters, thus, are less likely to use stereotypes to infer policy positions.

Why are Muslims so immune to policy stereotypes? Because of the dilemmas of inclusion (Dancygier, 2017), suppressive representation (Aydemir & Vliegenthart, 2016, 2022) and racial distancing (Stephens Dougan, 2020) they witness Muslim politicians with policy positions of all sorts. Muslims who pay attention to the political process are acutely aware of the political underrepresentation of Muslims (Aktürk & Katliarou, 2021), the diminishing value of their representation (Bailer et al., 2021), feelings of betrayal amongst fellow Muslims (Akachar, 2018; Akachar et al., 2017), and the electoral incentives working against the substantive representation of Muslim interests that I have laid out in this dissertation. In short, they know that a Muslim political representative does not naturally equal the representation of Muslim interests. If resistance towards the substantive representation of Muslims leads to permissiveness towards discrimination (Fernández-Reino et al., 2023), racialized state surveillance (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2019), racialized state control (Al-Faham, 2021), restriction of demonstration rights (van Oosten, 2024c) and mass civilian casualties during military operations (van Oosten, 2024d), this is not just a problem for Muslims, this is a problem for us all.

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