

PhD REVIEW

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 (PhD by Sanne van Oosten, University of Amsterdam)

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“Minority voting and representation” by Sanne van Oosten (2024) addresses the question, “Who prefers politicians with whom they share the same religion, migration background, and/or gender and why?” Van Oosten offers a timely intervention into the race and ethnic politics literature by helping us understand under what conditions voters prefer members of their in-group. While this question has been explored at length in the American context (Benjamin 2017; McConaughy 2010) there is still much to learn. For example, we still know very little about how in-group voting preferences operate in Europe, especially regarding the in-group voting preferences of European Muslims. We also do not know very much about the majority group’s voting preferences for Muslim politicians, as much of the study of the voting preferences of the majority group has focused on voter preferences at the *party* level and not at the *politician* level.

To that end, Van Oosten explores the topic of in-group voting preferences in France, Germany, and the Netherlands, across various subgroups, including Muslims, Christians, and non-religious people. She finds that Muslim voters are more likely to vote for Muslim politicians, especially when they share the same policy positions. However, the policy positions most preferred by the majority of Muslim voters are unpopular among majority voters, which poses a challenge to the substantive and descriptive representation of Muslim voters. Another challenge to Muslim representation and inclusion implied by Van Oosten’s results is that non-religious voters are the most

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likely to engage in identity politics by preferring their in-group, especially over the Muslim out-group. This reluctance to vote for the Muslim outgroup is likely due to majority voters stereotyping Muslim politicians.

Van Oosten also finds that because Muslim politicians experiencing stereotyping are acutely aware that they cannot rely solely on the votes of other Muslims to win elections, Muslim politicians are incentivized to engage in what she refers to as “broadstancing.” Similar to “racial distancing” (Stephens-Dougan 2020), “broadstancing” is defined as an attempt for politicians to broaden their electoral appeal by distancing themselves from their in-group. Sometimes this “broadstancing,” can help to promote egalitarian outcomes, such as Muslim politicians supporting and promoting gender and sexual equality. On the other hand, broadstancing can have negative implications for the Muslim electorate, as Muslim politicians who engage in broadstancing may criticize and even legally restrict Islamic practices, directly countering the interests of Muslim voters. Muslim voters already express low feelings of representation, political trust and satisfaction with democracy (Grewal and Hamid, 2022; Maxwell, 2010), and the results from this dissertation suggest that descriptive representation will not necessarily counteract these feelings among the Muslim community.

As Europe continues to wrestle with questions of integration and inclusion, this dissertation helps us to understand the likelihood of these outcomes as a function of ingroup voting preferences. Therefore, this research is as timely as it is informative. One minor quibble, however, is about the dissertation’s reliance on conjoint experiments. Conjoint experiments can be somewhat artificial, as respondents are being asked to evaluate a plethora of characteristics in a way that does not necessarily translate into how voters make choices in the real world. Moreover, recent research indicates that conjoint experiments assign greater weight to voters who intensely prefer a particular outcome, which means that conjoint experiments might not truly be indicative of majority preferences (Abramson et al. 2022). But, considering the multiple dimensions of ingroup preferences that Van Oosten was exploring in this ambitious dissertation, the need for a conjoint analysis is immediately obvious. Ultimately, she struck a nice balance between external validity, and being able to causally identify the conditions under which ingroup voting occurs.

References

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