

PHD SUMMARY

From Ambition to Admission: The Recruitment of Women in Politics

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Abstract

This dissertation examines why women remain underrepresented in politics, focusing on the demand side (candidate selection within political parties) and supply side (political ambition) of the political recruitment market in the Netherlands. An analysis of formal and informal selection procedures shows that political parties emphasize skills such as party and political experience. This indirectly disadvantages women, as more men have held political jobs. A survey experiment among party members shows that women are preferred for higher list positions, but political experience remains the decisive criterion. This only reinforces existing inequalities. On the supply side, the dissertation finds no substantial gender gap in political ambition among party members. However, women are less likely to become party members. The dissertation concludes that seemingly meritocratic selection criteria reproduce gender inequality and highlights the need for broader recruitment and stronger support for women candidates.

Keywords: Underrepresentation of women, Candidate selection, Candidate recruitment, Political ambition, Political violence

Women continue to be descriptively underrepresented in politics (IPU, 2024; Pitkin, 1967). This poses multiple problems for representative democracy. First of all, if parliament is supposed to represent society, it is highly unjust if women, constituting half of society, are not equally represented in parliament (Phillips, 1994). Moreover, there is ample evidence that when women are present, their interests are better represented (e.g. Celis, 2006; Clayton et al., 2017; Mendelberg et al., 2014).

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Underrepresentation is not only a problem for women, but for politics in general: When women are present, it improves trust in and legitimacy of political processes (e.g. Arnesen & Peters, 2018; Clayton et al., 2025; Schwindt-Bayer & Mishler, 2005). As such, the underrepresentation of women poses a problem to representative democracy at large. Therefore, it is imperative that we try to explain why women are underrepresented.

To explain underrepresentation, one can study electoral systems or whether voters discriminate against women. However, for the Dutch case, these explanations are rather insufficient, as the electoral system is theoretically one of the most beneficial systems for women (a proportional system, a high district magnitude, and the option to cast preference votes) (Ballington & Karam, 2005). Moreover, voters do not show a particular dislike of women politicians (Van Dijk & Van Holsteyn, 2022); in fact, they show a clear demand, as women are increasingly elected via preference votes (Kiesraad, 2017, 2021, 2023, 2025). The underrepresentation of women already occurs *before* the election: in the candidate recruitment stage within the party. Therefore, this dissertation focused on selection and recruitment of women: How do political parties select candidates, and how do individuals develop political ambition? And, ultimately, how are these processes gendered (Van Dijk, 2025)?

The first part of this dissertation centred on political parties: How do they formally and informally organise candidate selection? Within candidate selection, the selectorate (i.e. those who select) is the most important gatekeeper. The selectorate can consist of multiple actors, depending on the stage of the selection procedure. At the beginning of the procedure, most Dutch parties have a rather exclusive selection committee that decides which aspirants become candidates. To explore this stage, I studied the formal rules (retrieved from a content analysis of procedures) and informal rules (identified with semi-structured interviews) within nine Dutch political parties (Van Dijk, 2023a). Moreover, besides mapping the rules of the game, I identified the gendered consequences of their interaction: Do the rules work differently for men and women? These findings showed that most parties did aim for representative candidate lists, but that the emphasis on political and party experience created unequal opportunities. As men are overrepresented in political roles and among party members, parties are more likely to select men.

Selection committees only play a partial role in Dutch candidate selection, as party members – in most parties – also have the chance to influence the candidate list. To understand their preferences, I conducted a survey among party members of six political parties, including a preregistered rank conjoint experiment (Van Dijk, 2023b). The results showed that party members preferred women candidates for higher positions on the list. However, the key criterion for party members remained political experience. This means that the implicit preference for male candidates of exclusive selection committees is not corrected but rather *reinforced* by party members.

The second part of this dissertation shifted the focus to the supply side of recruitment: Who are the individuals that develop political ambition, and is this process gendered? As parties require candidates to be members, it is essential to study who party members are and whether there is a difference in political ambition between men and women. Using the Leiden Party Member Survey (LPMS) conducted between 1998 and 2017 (Den Ridder, 2014; Den Ridder et al., 2020; Koole et al., 2000), I examined whether party members have political ambition. It turns out that only a small proportion ($\approx 15\%$) of party members express political ambition, but there is no substantial difference between men and women (Van Dijk, 2024). The key problem here is that there are fewer women party members.²

Political ambition is not limited to party members: All citizens can engage in politics and aspire a political career. A large-scale survey among 25,000 respondents in Belgium and the Netherlands found that there is a gender difference in political ambition at the population level: Men express higher levels of political ambition than women. Moreover, men are more likely to display interest in joining a political party than women. The focus in this chapter, however, was not mainly on a potential gender gap in political ambition, but predominantly on how contextual factors shape political ambition: How does awareness of violence against politicians potentially depress levels of political ambition, and are these effects gendered? Based on a preregistered vignette experiment, we found no evidence for such a chilling effect. Moreover, this was not gendered in any sense: Both the target of the attack and the respondent's gender did not change the results (Van Dijk & Kosiara-Pedersen, 2025).

Based on these empirical chapters, I argue that the underrepresentation of women still rests within the political party. Although gendered effects are perhaps not particularly obvious – parties aim for representative lists and women are even favoured by party members – they remain rather covert. When parties prioritise candidates with political experience, the gendered consequences are indirect: These criteria appear neutral, but, as fewer women hold political office or are party members, parties are still more likely to select men. By showing how supposedly 'meritocratic' selection procedures reproduce gendered outcomes, this thesis contributes to the literature on (gendered) party politics and political recruitment. Moreover, this dissertation showed that the challenge for parties in creating more diverse candidate lists lies in (1) recruiting more women as members, (2) supporting

2 In the LMPS 1998–2017 29% of respondents were women. In my survey (Van Dijk, 2023a), only 22% of respondents were women. All four surveys are not fielded in representative sample. Nevertheless, all four surveys indicate a persistent pattern of underrepresentation of women. Combined with the population data provided by some of the parties themselves (see Table A.3.4 in Van Dijk, 2025), the pattern of severe underrepresentation appears to be robust.

women aspirants in gaining political experience, and (3) broadening search criteria beyond narrow definitions of political experience.

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