

PHD REVIEW

From Ambition to Admission: The Recruitment of Women in Politics

Michal Grahn¹

Abstract

Candidate selection – the process through which political parties choose individuals to represent the party's banner in elections – has received lively scholarly attention since Gallagher and Marsh (1988) famously described it as party politics' "secret garden". Candidate selection is essential to understanding democratic politics: It reveals how political parties operate internally and serves as a critical bottleneck shaping who is represented, how legislators act, and how well governments govern. The PhD dissertation by Rozemarijn van Dijk, *From Ambition to Admission: The Recruitment of Women in Politics* (2025), represents an important contribution to our understanding of candidate selection processes in the Netherlands, where political parties are key gatekeepers to elected office. Taking a gender perspective and drawing on the supply-and-demand framework developed by Norris and Lovenduski (1995), the dissertation traces the path to elected office from the aspirant to the candidate level, with the aim to account for women's continued political underrepresentation in Dutch politics.

On the whole, Van Dijk's dissertation points to strong methodological and theoretical acumen. Candidate selection is inherently difficult to study, partly because the supply and demand sides are endogenous, but also because the criteria political parties use in their internal candidate selection processes are most often not publicly available. To overcome these challenges, Van Dijk demonstrates her ability to conduct qualitative fieldwork (Van Dijk 2023b), offer novel analyses of existing survey data (Van Dijk 2023a), and carry out original experiments (Van Dijk and Kosiara-Pedersen 2025).

Politics of the Low Countries is published with financial support from the Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique-FNRS.

¹ Michal Grahn, Uppsala University, Sweden, michal.grahn@statsvet.uu.se.

Her early embrace of experiments as a means to study candidate selection makes the dissertation a state-of-the-art contribution to contemporary debates.

Beyond methodological versatility, Van Dijk demonstrates an ability to make theoretical contributions in a field that is theoretically saturated. To illustrate, Van Dijk (2023b) proposes a theoretical model that captures different ways in which formal recruitment rules might interact with informal norms about what makes an ideal candidate and produce gendered outcomes. This simple yet analytically fecund framework represents a significant theoretical contribution to demand-side research on gendered candidate selection.

Van Dijk's dissertation also opens avenues for future inquiry. First, the framework mapping the interaction between formal rules and informal norms is developed in the Dutch context, but its analytical logic travels well. Future research could productively apply it comparatively, examining how the same interplay produces different gendered outcomes across electoral systems and party systems where the institutional configuration differs from the Dutch case. Second, the conjoint studies capture party member preferences at a single point in time, but candidate selection criteria may shift as the composition of party memberships changes or as gender equality norms evolve. Longitudinal research tracking whether the premium placed on political experience and party service persists – or erodes – over time would be a valuable extension of Van Dijk's findings. Third, the dissertation focuses on gender as the primary axis of underrepresentation, but political aspirants face compounding barriers along lines of ethnicity, class, and age (see Grahn & Thisell, 2025). Extending the theoretical framework Van Dijk proposes to account for intersectional dynamics would substantially broaden its analytical reach and policy relevance.

Overall, the dissertation is an engaging and illuminating read that makes Dutch candidate selection less of a secret garden.

References

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