

Doctor of Political Science

Democratic Institutions and Long-Term Action:
Exploring the Institutional Antecedents of Presentism and Intergenerational
Justice

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Abstract

Democracies, in their current, representative form are believed to be partial towards the present. They fail to sufficiently pay attention to long-term challenges, focus on producing short-term benefits, and refrain from making policy investments. This problem is known as democratic myopia, democratic short-termism, or the presentist bias in democratic policy-making. To the extent that the short-termism of democracies leads to an unjust distribution of costs and benefits across generations, it contributes to substantive intergenerational injustices to the detriment of the unborn. But also in procedural terms democracies are said to fail the unborn. Due to the sensitivity of politicians to the tyrannical voices of myopic voters and the absence of future generations, the interests of those who are yet to come are presumed to be absent from our democratic deliberations.

This dissertation aims to advance our understanding of how present-day representative democracies favor the present over the future by taking a step back. Its main goal is to research how existing institutions (and the actors functioning within them) contribute to democratic short-termism, substantive intergenerational justice, and the representation of future generations. By addressing four research questions, it will explore mechanisms through which democratic short-termism is perpetuated, and it seeks to examine the potential of existing institutions to address this problem. The four research questions are addressed in four empirical chapters.

The first empirical chapter looks at the institutional diversity between democracies, and examines which institutions hamper or alleviate their presentist bias by conducting a cross-national quantitative analysis of 36 democracies. The results show that institutions matter. More specifically, consensus democracies, characterized by institutions that foster political inclusion, political stability, and fragmented authority, tend to do better than their majoritarian democracies. One notable exception is Belgium. As a prime example of a consensus democracy, it lags behind compared to similar democracies. The next papers therefore focus on Belgium as a case to further advance our understanding of the presentist bias of democracies.

The second chapter shifts our attention to procedural intergenerational justice and explores the representation of future generations in the Belgian federal Chamber of Representatives between 2010 and 2019. The claims-making analysis shows that claims on behalf of future generations are rare and often of poor quality. Electoral considerations seem to be at play when representing those who cannot vote, since fewer claims are made in election years and electoral vulnerability decreases the willingness of representatives to voice the interests of posterity.

That is why, for the third paper, claims in the Chamber of Representatives are compared to claims in the Senate. During this period, the Senate was partly non-elected, and the work in the Senate was more obscured from short-sighted public scrutiny due to its limited powers. Moreover, the Senate had an explicit mandate to consider the long-term impact of policy decisions. We would, therefore, expect claims to represent posterity to be more frequent in the Senate compared to the Chamber, and to be more frequent among non-elected Senators compared to elected Senators. The analysis disproved both hypotheses.

To better understand why Belgium fails future generations in both substantive and procedural terms, the fourth paper concentrates on the experiences of policy-makers. Based on a thematic analysis of interviews conducted with 40 federal and Flemish members of parliament, seven factors can be discerned. These are: elections and electoral competition, traditional and social media, coalition governments, partitocracy, federalism, the power of interest groups, and uncertainty. The analysis shows the intricate ways in which barriers to future-regarding action interact and hamper the ability of representatives to engage in future-regarding action.

Together, the results of the four empirical chapters generate four general conclusions: (1) institutional diversity matters in relation to democratic short-termism and substantive intergenerational justice; (2) institutions affect democratic short-termism in complex ways; (3) basic institutions can be redesigned to promote intergenerational justice; and (4) future generations can be represented by present actors, and their representation is highly versatile. The dissertation ends with two normative discussions on whether and how our democracies should be reformed for the sake of those who are yet to come.