Ethnicity, Gender and the Intersectional (Dis)Advantage in the Brussels Preferential Voting System. Dynamic Process and Context Dependency

Chloé Janssen

Abstract. Despite the increasing presence of women and ethnic minorities, elected assemblies remain largely dominated by ethnic majority men. Previous researchers have often focused on mechanisms and processes enhancing or hindering the representation of women and ethnic minority groups in isolation of each other. Research has for instance shown that the electoral system is a determinant factor for women representation, while the sociodemographic context appears to be more determinant to explain levels of ethnic minority representation. But more recent researches indicate that these mechanisms and processes often ignore the presence of individuals situated at the intersection of these groups, i.e. ethnic minority women. The present research considers intersectionality as a research paradigm to understand the complexity of the (dis)advantage experienced by individuals in the electoral process based on their intersectional identities.

This research aims to highlight the contextual impact of proportional representation (PR) rules on the intersectional representation of gender and ethnic groups. This study builds on the previous assumption that, more than electoral rules, it is parties and voters’ intertwined roles and behaviour in the (s)election process that ultimately determine who gets represented within elected assemblies. The objective of this research is to demonstrate how the behaviour of parties and voters towards marginalized groups members is influenced by the combination of sociodemographic and institutional factors, and how it shapes the barriers and opportunities faced by these groups to enter politics. This research highlights the necessity to consider relationships between actors as well as between actors and their environment and shows how these dynamic interactions determine when and how intersectional identities lead to a (dis)advantage in the electoral process.

Brussels local elections are considered as a relevant case to conduct this study because of the saliency of ethnicity and gender in this context and because the strong preferential voting system in use allows for both parties and voters to play strategic roles in the representation of gender and ethnic groups.