

**Creating a Civic National Identity:
Integration Through Immigrant Political Participation**

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I. Introduction

State citizenship grants the citizen many rights, but the rights most fundamental to a democracy are the right to vote and the right to run for elected office. In the traditional formulations of the nation-state, it has been clear who possesses these rights, but over the last half-century, widespread international migration has complicated the definition of the citizen and has called into question the perceived unity between the nation and the state, between citizenship and nationality, and between civic participation and national identity. In this study, I will examine these complications in the specific case of the Netherlands, a country particularly well known for its recent history of cosmopolitanism. I will examine the effect of these debates on citizenship, and national identity on the ability of migrants to become involved in the Dutch political system as well as the nature of their civic participation. From the basis of this research, I will argue that immigrant political participation is a useful measure of civic integration and that the civic integration that comes with this participation can lead to an increased tolerance of difference within society, which can help to create a new civically, rather than culturally, based national identity. Furthermore, the presence of immigrants and ethnic minorities in local and national politics helps to maintain the relevance of the Dutch state to its population in today's globalized world. For this reason, research on the subject of immigrant political integration is important for understanding both the present and future situations of countries receiving immigrants.

The first major section of the essay begins by defining and presenting the history of concepts like nationality, citizenship, and the nation-state. I present the current academic debates surrounding these subjects, including questions of whether it is still proper to speak of the nation-state as a unified entity, the effects of multiple citizenship and migration on the international system, as well as propositions regarding potential future forms of citizenship. To conclude the section, I describe the shape of the academic debate about multicultural states and multiculturalism.

The second section of the article presents the historical context of Dutch multicultural policy as it has changed over the past five decades. I discuss the concept of autochthony and describe the consequences of how it has been used in the Netherlands for present-day migrants. The third section presents the academic debate surrounding policies for the political integration of minorities. It explores the idea of descriptive representation and evaluates the value of that type of representation for minority groups. It also describes the general political situation of migrants within Europe. The fourth section places the situation of migrant politicians in the Netherlands in the context of other European nations. I will use this comparison to draw conclusions about the effect of the Dutch political system, immigration debate, and citizenship policy on migrant political participation, as well as the effects of migrant political participation on the national identities of Dutch migrants and non-migrants.

II. Theorizing Civic and National Belonging

A. Is the Nation-State Still Relevant?

The model of the nation-state that saw an inherent link between national-cultural identity and state-civic identity developed at a time before the increasing interconnectedness and heightened mobility offered by modern globalization. Now, faced with the pressures of increased migration, the nation-state has struggled to respond. As stated by Castles and Miller, "international migration has changed the face of societies."¹ Globalizing trends, driven by advances in

communications and transportation technology, have made it easier than ever before for human beings to move from one place to another and communicate over long distances, with little or no attention to either the man-made or natural boundaries that have historically kept people apart. One result of this heightened mobility is that it becomes “easier to have important and durable relationships of a political, economic, social or cultural nature in two or more societies at once.”² In addition to all the positive consequences that this increased interconnectedness can have for societies, it also creates challenges to formerly stable systems of association. Among these systems is the model of the modern nation-state, a model that assumes the primacy of all of its citizens’ loyalty. This primacy of loyalty is now threatened by the ease with which members of any one state can communicate with members of any other state, resulting not only in international cultural flows, but also transnational flows that “ignore, subvert, and devalue rather than celebrate national boundaries.”³ Rather than having distinct states with distinct national cultures, many see a growing trend toward transnational cultures that extend beyond the reach of state boundaries.

B. Multiple Citizenship and National Identity in the Multicultural State

Although “citizenship” and “nationality” are often used interchangeably, it is important in this essay to understand the ways in which the terms are used differently within academic discussions, and the connotations that each term has when used to discuss individual and group membership in a community. Both terms refer to a certain kind of belonging on the part of the individual to a larger whole, but they are distinct in the *type* of belonging. Jussi Ronkainen defines the terms in this way: “dual citizenship is demarcated to mean political status and rights and dual nationality to refer to socio-cultural belonging and identity.”⁴ At the time of the formation of the nation-state, these two types of belonging were seen as inextricably linked, but as we enter a globalized world it is necessary to question the hyphenation of the nation-state and begin to see nationality as an identity that can be uncoupled from the legal framework of the state.

Globalization has made it possible for people in different countries to feel “emotionally and culturally connected,” and to “ignore □ or at least try to ignore □ the national boundaries that separate them.”⁵ Responding to these increasing transnational cultural tendencies, and in order to remain relevant to their citizens, states have responded in two contradictory ways. First, states have moved toward “the rewriting [of national] identity in civic terms.”⁶ Prior to this development, national identity was largely discussed in cultural and ethnic terms, but due to the growth of transnational cultural identity, nation-states have been forced to look for other means of self-identification. Rather than looking to a shared history, states have turned to a vocabulary of “common values, shared interests and a set of common institutions” as the ties that bind members of a nation together.⁷ Second, and in effect largely counteracting the first effort, states have “adopted stricter immigration and asylum laws, [and] introduced citizenship tests which check for the compatibility of the culture of the newcomer.”⁸ These measures, among others, “indirectly aim at preserving the ideal of a cultural-ethnic character of the nation.”⁹

Marco Antonisch proposes an alternative method of binding a nation together that focuses on the common experiences that residents of a “politico-institutional bounded space” share, rather than cultural or ethnic similarity.¹⁰ For Antonisch, “while ethnicity (or kinship) is an important mechanism in generating social integration, this latter is also produced by two other mechanisms: the functional division of labour and the political organization of space.”¹¹ In his article, Antonisch chooses to focus more on the second of these two mechanisms, arguing that the very

act of “living together” in the same space can help to create a “sentiment of awareness of what is common” that can help to bind a society together.¹²

Rainier Bauböck approaches the problem differently, and echoes Bhikhu Parekh when he says that multicultural societies resulting from migration must build cohesion “on a foundation of diversity rather than of similarity.”¹³ For him, the real problem with the current formulation of the nation-state is that it views identities as exclusive and loyalties as overriding.¹⁴ Bauböck sees a trend back towards the melting-pot model of multiculturalism, which requires “that immigrants must adopt the national identity of the receiving country as their primary affiliation.”¹⁵ This idea is flawed, according to Bauböck, due to the fact that it ignores the real influence of transnational migration flows on the “pluralistic transformation of destination societies.”¹⁶ With respect to this new paradigm, he believes that, “we should conceive of [migrant] identities as *overarching* and *overlapping* rather than as overriding.”¹⁷

Steven Dijkstra and colleagues see a similar deficiency in the current linkage of citizenship rights with “a specific national-cultural identity,” which results in “a situation in which not every resident of a state has access to full citizenship and its corresponding rights.”¹⁸ However, their solution to this problem is slightly different. They propose a mechanism that they label “post-national citizenship,” which would grant citizenship rights to any resident within a state’s boundaries who has lived within that state for a certain period of time.¹⁹ The objective of their idea of post-national citizenship, like Bauböck’s conception of overarching and overlapping national-cultural identities, is not to create a mechanism “to realize a unity in society” but rather “to organize plurality.”²⁰ These goals are differentiated from Antonisch’s search for a mechanism to generate social integration by their emphasis on “the capacity of differences to be united” rather than a search for “commonality” in any form.²¹

Despite the momentum behind these ideas of transnationalism and multiculturalism in the academic community and in certain areas of political debate, state migration policies refuse to reconceptualize their ideas of unitary legal and cultural belonging, even in the face of increasing cultural difference. What we find instead is an increasing emphasis by states on defining a single national identity, a phenomenon that signifies “the ‘return of the local’ in a world that believes it is globalizing.”²² Nowhere is this emphasis on the local more apparent than in the introduction of the term “autochthon” to the Dutch political vocabulary in the early 1990s as a way of defining those who are “of the Netherlands,” in opposition to the “allochthonous” foreign migrants.

III. Dutch Multicultural Policy

In the aftermath of World War II the Netherlands began receiving large numbers and large groups of immigrants for the first time in its history. In the beginning these immigrants were mostly “repatriates” returning to the Netherlands after the decolonization of the Dutch East-Indies, and public policy “directed at rapid assimilation of these returning compatriots” was the obvious response.²³ The policy succeeded, but the assimilation of these repatriates into Dutch society reinforced the idea that the Netherlands “was anything but a country of immigration” and cultural diversity.²⁴

A. Guest Workers

Subsequent immigrant groups were not so easily assimilated. In order to provide sufficient labor for national industry, the Dutch government encouraged the temporary migration of workers from outside the Netherlands in the 1960s and early 1970s. At first these migrants came from

Southern European countries and former Dutch colonies, as well as Suriname and the Dutch Antilles, but demand for labor required that the Netherlands invite workers from Turkey and Morocco as well. These laborers were consciously not termed immigrants “so as to avoid creating the illusion that they were permanent settlers,” and were instead referred to as “guest-workers,” with the expectation that they would eventually return to their home countries. The emphasis on the temporary nature of the guest-workers residence in the Netherlands prevented the government from enacting any policies aimed at bridging the gap between these workers and the larger Dutch society. Instead, the Dutch government enacted policies encouraging bonding within guest-worker communities that aimed “to preserve the internal group structures [of the transplanted workers] and [workers’] children were offered facilities for education in their own language and culture.”²⁵ The assumption of the government was that any sort of bridging between these guest-workers and larger Dutch society might “hamper their return to their home countries.”²⁶

This policy of migrant isolation led to growing tensions, and in the case of some Moluccan immigrants, the isolation escalated to radicalization. The resulting terrorist acts “became a catalyst for drawing attention to the marginalized position of these immigrants in particular and of migrants in general.”²⁷ One positive outcome of this unfortunate situation was that, “for the first time, the issue of how to give immigrants a permanent position in Dutch society emerged on the political agenda.”²⁸

B. A Multi-Ethnic Society?

The Dutch government of the 1980s approached the issue of minority belonging “in the context of an ‘open, multi-ethnic society.’”²⁹ In reality, this meant that rather than an isolationist policy toward minority groups, the government began to approach minorities as less defined by static group identity and more as “dynamic and heterogeneous.” It proposed a policy of bridging with the intent of preventing “processes of cultural isolation and socio-economic deprivation.”³⁰ Entailed in this policy was an emphasis on “adaptation to national norms and values,” and of an orientation towards the state and citizenship rather than towards “minority groups that might turn their backs on society.”³¹ There was still a place for minority group bonding within this new approach to the problem, but “bridging was seen as a positive condition for bonding, as bridging would contribute to a better socio-economic position for minorities and consequently allow more room for them to experience their own cultural identities as well as secure more tolerance toward these minorities.”³² This multiculturalist policy led as well to an “institutionalization of pluralism” in the Dutch government, and an institution called the National Consultation and Advisory Council for Minorities was created as a tool to ensure the accurate representation of ethnic minority interests in policy-making.³³

Though in many other European countries immigrant minorities were defined by their racial difference, “in the Netherlands they were instead defined by ethnic and cultural origin (cultural non-conformity).” Although seen as more liberal at the time, this categorization has proved to be more resilient and equally divisive.³⁴ This model, which Jan Rath termed the Minorities Paradigm, “legitimizes government interference with ethnic minorities” while also allowing the government to exclude ethnic minorities from mainstream political and economic debate due to their “social-cultural non-conformity.”³⁵ This exclusion “helped to strengthen the ‘imagined national community’” of the Netherlands by providing a visible example for Dutch society as to what is *not* the norm.³⁶

C. Integration: The End of Multiculturalism

In the early 1990s, as government involvement in minority group bonding began to be criticized, the concept of “ethnic minority” also began to be “regularly replaced by [the term] ‘allochthonous.’” This marked a shift from a multiculturalist approach to a more individual, citizenship-based conception of the solution.³⁷ This shift was exemplified in the policy’s name change from “‘Minorities Policy’ to ‘Integration Policy.’”³⁸ Structurally, this shift meant an increase in civic integration courses, the reduced instruction of minority languages in school curriculums, and, with regard to policy formation, the advisory role of immigrant organizations “was downgraded to a mere consultative role.”³⁹ If they wanted to have their voices heard, immigrants needed to take an active role in exercising their own citizenship rights as individuals rather than as primarily members of a certain social group.

D. After 9/11: Assimilation

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the government policy shifted once again, this time to an assimilationist track. Rather than being seen as a tool for socio-economic integration, bridging between minority groups and the wider Dutch society began to include “a degree of socio-cultural adaptation.”⁴⁰ Instead of a focus on the “active citizenship” of the 1990s, which put a greater emphasis on the individual and the importance of individual political engagement as it phased out minority-group-based programs, the Dutch government, in response to populist movements, began to promote “common citizenship,” which includes cultural norms along with civic and political responsibilities. In order to avoid “being blamed for ignoring the voice from the street,” Dutch politicians framed the problem in the interest of the majority, rather than approaching it with an eye for equity, as in the 1990s, or with attention to the interests of the minority.⁴¹ Despite the seeming continuity of Dutch multiculturalist policy, in reality the past half-century has seen a succession of at least three distinct policies. The goals of these policies have not simply changed, but in many cases “the effects of policies from a particular period were negatively valued in other[s],” with the consequence being that policymakers began to see stricter and stricter measures as necessary because previous policies seemed to be failing.⁴²

E. The Effects of the Rhetoric of Autochthony on Migrants to the Netherlands

“The most prominent dividing line between ‘us’ and ‘them’ in Dutch society at this point in time is country of origin.”⁴³

The term allochthonous, which refers to immigrants to the Netherlands or those of immigrant descent since the early 1990s, has its origins in geological terminology. It is used to refer to rocks or other minerals “not formed in the region where found,”⁴⁴ and carries with it a subtext due to its etymology that, “allochthonous entities retain characteristics that identify them as ‘belonging’ elsewhere many long years after their initial displacement.”⁴⁵ The modern idea of autochthony, however, which is very closely related to the original definition of the word, is not simply an objective statement about the relationship between a person and his or her place of birth; it also constitutes a political statement implying that this connection represents “the most authentic form of belonging,” to the detriment of any who wish to claim a connection to a territory without being originally “of that land.”⁴⁶

In Greek philosophy this idea was articulated by Plato, using the voice of Socrates, who claimed autochthony as the basis of Athenian democracy when he said that, “we and our people...being all born of one mother, claim to be neither the slaves of one another nor the masters; rather does our natural birth-equality drive us to seek legal equality.”⁴⁷ A sharp critique of this policy also comes from the Greeks in the playwright Euripides’ tragedy *Ion*. In this play, the title character observes that: “if a foreigner, even though nominally a citizen, comes into that pure-bred city, his tongue is enslaved and he has no freedom of speech.”⁴⁸

Despite the seeming inflexibility of the definition of autochthony as applied in the Netherlands, the status of *autochthon* is denied not only to those who are born outside of the Netherlands, but also to those with as little as one allochthonous grandparent. Although the term had been introduced as a way to avoid the same negative connotations that had come to be associated with the word “migrant,” this way of defining it assured that it would take on a similarly problematic meaning. The consequences of this definition are that it is possible not only to define a person born on Dutch soil as foreign and “not of the land,” but also to define their children, who are citizens of the Netherlands from birth, as foreign.⁴⁹ Imposing such a rigid definition of the “other,” such that it actually creates the “other” within the Dutch citizenry, only supports the idea that immigrants will never be able to integrate completely.⁵⁰ The paradox of autochthony, and the reason that it cannot be a sustainable response to globalizing trends, is that it “celebrates the primacy of being rooted as something self-evident, but it does so to enable participation in a world shaped by migration.”⁵¹

IV. Minority Representation and Democracy

A. Is Descriptive Representation Desirable?

Although the democratic system is naturally a system of majority rule, in practice it is vital that every democratic system of government has certain mechanisms to protect the rights and advance the interests of minority groups within the state. Strict pursuit of policies in favor of the majority with no attention to the desires of the minority serve only to further reproduce the factors that distinguish these groups from one another. Therefore, those policies can only reproduce and amplify the dissatisfaction of minority groups who feel that they are not represented by their government. There are many mechanisms that can be used to create this sort of representation, but the most common, and the one I focus on in this study, is called “descriptive representation.”

Descriptive representation occurs when members of a minority group are elected to office in proportional numbers to their share of the population. Though in some cases this sort of representation is reached by the use of quotas, it can also be approximated by the use of proportional parliamentary representation (as in the Netherlands) so long as structures are in place to encourage minority political involvement and voting. The idea behind this sort of representation (rather than substantive representation in which minority interests are advanced by specific elected officials who may or may not share their minority status) is not just the controversial assertion that members of specific minority groups understand the situation of their identity group better than any other representative due to the shared experiences they have with other members of the minority group. The more important impact of this type of representation is that the visible presence of minorities in government helps to legitimize that government for the minority groups. In this way, not only do they feel as though their voices are being heard, but also that the state is a place that welcomes them as well as members of the society’s majority

identity: “The presence of minority elected officials sends out a contextual cue to minority citizens that the benefits of voting outweigh the costs of not voting.”⁵² This is the aspect of descriptive representation that I see as most vital for the successful integration of these minority groups into a society as a whole. Minority communities are often faulted for their lack of political engagement and civic activism, but too often the proper government mechanisms for minority political participation are not in place and those who wish to participate cannot. This not only inhibits the capacity of minorities to become active in their own government, but also denies them the opportunity to demonstrate their identification with a community beyond their ethnic group by participating in national civic society.⁵³

The reluctance of many states to provide these avenues for the political incorporation of minorities, despite the high degree of civic integration that this demonstrates, has its roots in the fear of the disassociation of the nation from the state. Having already entered the cultural and economic realms, entrance into the political sphere represents the final “infringement” of the “other” into the realm of the natives.⁵⁴ Otto Bauer’s opus on the multicultural German state in the late 1800s provides a startlingly relevant description of the modern European situation. He contends that, notwithstanding the necessity of multicultural governance, the threat posed by the incorporation of “foreign” nationals into the apparatus of the state is that, “the despised national adversary now became the representative of the power of the state,” resulting in what is seen as “a form of foreign domination.”⁵⁵ This popular perception is flawed, however, because the desire to become involved in the politics of the state you live in signifies a high level of affiliation to and identification with that state, which is exactly what most nationalists believe needs to be created among non-native residents and citizens.

In his study of the various types of legal and cultural belonging, Jussie Ronkainen found that of the many types of belonging, “only identification to community brings along active participation.”⁵⁶ Similarly, in Barbara Donovan’s exploration of minority representation in Germany she found that, “‘homeland’ orientations [are] most prevalent in municipalities that ‘offer immigrants few channels of access to the decision-making process and grant them little legitimacy in the public domain’ whereas political orientations directed toward the host country were more likely to be present in cases where there was more political inclusion.”⁵⁷ In this way, “descriptive representation becomes a facilitator of social inclusion”⁵⁸ as participation “strengthens representational links, [and] fosters more positive attitudes towards government,” easing the tensions between the state and minorities, and providing minorities an avenue through which they can contribute positively to the state in which they live.⁵⁹

B. How are Ethnic Minorities Represented throughout Europe?

The European Union is home to around twenty million Muslims, a group that has in many countries come to be understood as synonymous with immigrant, foreign, and non-Western. “Muslim” has become a label of ethnicity rather than simply a religious belief. Of these sixteen million, fewer than thirty served in national parliaments throughout Europe in 2005.⁶⁰ This under-representation is primarily the result of strict naturalization laws and the lack of proper mechanisms in society to allow and encourage new citizens to become involved in the state’s political systems.

One example of this systemic lack is Germany, a country that faces many similar issues of immigration as the Netherlands. Although Germany allows foreign residents access to state programs, such as welfare, housing, and public education, “political citizenship comes only with naturalization.”⁶¹ There is no institutional mechanism of democratic consultation between the

government and the Muslim community, and the Muslim/migrant community as a whole is generally viewed as disengaged from the political process. This perception, however, is not held up by the facts, as the participation levels of migrants are “quite typical, given their education and income levels.”⁶² The strongest predictors of political engagement among German citizens are not national or ethnic identity, but rather age and education.⁶³ The perception of disengagement, then, is caused by the fact that many in the Muslim community are prohibited from becoming politically involved due to their immigration status. Instead, when they are refused the possibility of participating in mainstream political organizations, Muslims are often encouraged to join or create Muslim-only organizations, which increases the sense of the segregation of immigrant communities.⁶⁴ This perception can be remedied via the adoption of less strict citizenship requirements or through the extension of political involvement to residents, as has been done in countries such as Denmark and the Netherlands, measures that increase immigrant participation in mainstream political organizations.

Danish law allows foreign residents of Danish municipalities to vote in local elections and even run for local elected office as long as they have lived legally in the country for four consecutive years (up from three years, prior to 2010).⁶⁵ Participation in civic life is not tied to citizenship, and even as Danish immigration laws have become much stricter over the past few years this distinction has remained. At the peak of this open policy, in the early 2000s, the result was a situation in which “the number of ethnic minorities in both the national parliament and local councils in Denmark almost corresponds to their number in the general population.”⁶⁶ The Danish system for local elections is a proportional system in which “the selection of candidates from the party list is strongly influenced by each candidate’s personal votes.”⁶⁷ This means that candidates can move up the list if they garner more votes than those above them, a process called list-jumping, and it is through this mechanism that three-fifths of the ethnic minority candidates won in the 2001 Danish elections.⁶⁸

Despite the Danish electoral system’s openness to foreign citizens, a disproportionate majority of the elected ethnic minority representatives have taken Danish citizenship. While “60 percent of the minority electorate” are foreign citizens, only “25 percent of the elected candidates hold foreign citizenship.”⁶⁹ This shows that despite the openness of the political system to foreign citizens, Danish citizenship is still an attractive option for those looking to get into politics in Denmark. Interestingly, the motivation for many ethnic minority candidates to run for elected office is prior employment in the public sector, specifically work that deals directly with the integration of immigrants into national society:⁷⁰ “It is those building the bridges between the immigrant community and the municipality who have entered local politics.”⁷¹ In the Danish elections of 2001, for example, “26 percent of the ethnic minority representatives in local councils had been members of the immigration councils in the preceding years.”⁷² This demonstrates the importance and the effectiveness of integration programs that provide minorities with a way into civic participation.

The legal structure in the Netherlands is currently quite similar to the Danish system, and the rhetoric surrounding the issue of immigration over the past decade has made the Dutch situation a very interesting one to examine due to the disconnect between national political rhetoric and the legal frameworks that have been put together over the past five decades in response to immigrants to the Netherlands.

V. Immigrant Politicians in the Netherlands

A. How Does the Dutch Situation Compare to Other European Countries?

The Dutch electoral system is one of the most liberal in the world. The Netherlands was one of the earliest European countries to grant voting rights in local elections to foreign citizens, doing so in 1985. Five years of legal residence are required before non-citizens can exercise this right, which makes it slightly more restrictive than Danish law, but still quite open.⁷³ Municipal elections also do not require pre-registration in order to vote, another factor that makes it much easier for people who are not in the habit of voting regularly to participate in Dutch democracy.⁷⁴ Strangely enough, this enfranchisement was not the result of a long battle by immigrants themselves who mobilized to demand representation. Instead, it was the result of a decision by the Dutch political elite who, in order to maintain order and generate a sense of community belonging among migrants, felt it was necessary for foreign residents to be enfranchised at the local level.⁷⁵ Only Dutch citizens can participate in national elections, but despite this a large share of immigrant-origin minorities participate. Two-thirds of Moroccans and Turks in the Netherlands hold Dutch citizenship, and “in the 2006 parliamentary elections, 1.2 million persons originating from the main immigrant countries □ approximately 10 per cent of the total electorate □ had the right to vote.”⁷⁶ After those same elections, politicians of non-Western origin held 11.3 percent of the seats in the national parliament, a proportion actually higher than the percentage of the electorate with immigrant origins.⁷⁷

Representation is even better in large cities, and in most cases the number of elected politicians of foreign origin is proportionate to the number of foreign-origin residents of the cities.⁷⁸ In Rotterdam, the city with the best rate of representation for immigrants, candidates get their names out through “targeted campaigns in the languages of the ethnic groups” and through meetings “organized through the migrant associations.”⁷⁹ The result is that immigrant voters turn out in large numbers and take the opportunity to issue a preferential vote for a specific candidate at a much higher rate than do the “native” Dutch.⁸⁰ Despite the momentum that immigrant representatives gain from the support of their ethnic communities, once they are elected many find themselves in a frustrating situation. On the basis of their recent electoral successes it would seem that immigrants to the Netherlands are both highly integrated and highly accepted, but this is not the case. Despite the electoral structure of the Netherlands, which supports the enfranchisement and representation of minority groups, the culture of Dutch national politics in the last decade has become increasingly hostile to immigrants. This hostility has made it nearly impossible for immigrant-origin representatives to advance the issues relevant to their communities, despite the strength of their support and their willingness to work within the system.

B. How does the Situation Look from the Vantage Point of the Immigrant Politician?

The current situation of Dutch politics with regard to ethnic minorities is best summarized by one Muslim member of parliament interviewed by Jytte Klausen in 2005: “it is difficult today to argue that Muslims have special needs...All Dutch voters can think about is how they are disadvantaged by foreigners.”⁸¹ Compounding this initial prejudice, says Farah Karimi, an Iranian refugee to the Netherlands who held office in the Dutch Lower House from 1998 to 2006, is the “lacking of courage” on the part of Dutch politicians “to explain certain unpopular policies” that actually have the interests of all Dutch at their core.⁸² One example of such a

policy, according to Karimi, is “public funding for Islamic schools or for the education of imams ...to counter the influence of countries like Saudi Arabia on the [Dutch] Muslim community.”⁸³ This climate, according to a poll conducted in Klausen’s study of European Muslim leaders, is fostered first and foremost by negative press treatment of Muslims; secondary factors include right-wing anti-Islam rhetoric and the lack of economic opportunities for working age Muslims.⁸⁴ The convergence of all of these factors —negative press coverage, right-wing domination of public political conversation, the reluctance of fellow politicians to present the case for reasonable policies, and the strong party discipline that characterizes European parliaments —means that, “for many Muslim politicians, who need the support of party colleagues to get ahead, Islam and discrimination amount to what Americans call the third rail of politics: ‘you touch it and you’re dead.’”⁸⁵

C. The Effects of the Current Dutch Political Climate on Immigrant Political Involvement

While the Netherlands guarantees full political and electoral rights to migrants, and can claim one of the most liberal policies in the European Union with regard to the ability of non-citizens to vote and even run for local elected office (a policy that has led to near proportionate ethnic representation in local parliaments and city councils), the Netherlands still fails to provide the sort of stable local consultative political structures that encourage migrants to make their voices heard in policy debates.⁸⁶ Despite the impressive penetration of minority politicians into Dutch politics, many feel unable to adequately address the issues facing migrant communities due either to the need to subordinate their views to that of the party or to fears that bringing forth these complaints will pigeonhole them as the “Moroccan” or “Turkish” representative, rather than someone representing the legitimate concerns of all those who voted to elect them.⁸⁷

While there have been many minority politicians who have succeeded in winning elected office in the Netherlands, the average response to a Eurobarometer question in 2009 about how (on a scale of 1 to 10) the respondent would feel about “having a person from a different ethnic origin than the majority of the population in the highest elected political position in your country?” was 6.4, placing the Netherlands just above average for European countries (6.2).⁸⁸ More favorable responses to this question include Sweden (8.0), Denmark (7.2), the United Kingdom (7.0), Spain (7.1), France (7.3), and Poland (7.2), among others.⁸⁹ The same poll reveals that only 38 percent of the Dutch are able to declare that they would feel not at all uncomfortable with an elected official to national office being of a minority ethnic background (compared to 66% of Swedes, 53% of French, 50% of British, 58% of Danes, 47% of Spanish, and 48% of Polish).⁹⁰ The numbers are extremely similar when the same question is asked with regard to elected officials of a different religion from the majority of the population.⁹¹

These results indicate a possible decrease in the number of “ethnic” Dutch who welcome representatives of a different ethnicity from the results of a 2006 Eurobarometer poll in which 49 percent of respondents felt that the Netherlands needed more politicians of different ethnic origins.⁹² This decrease could be attributed to the persistent negative portrayals of migrant communities over the last decade.

At the same time, however, the level of political participation by migrant communities seems to be shrinking, a fact that is especially visible in larger cities like Amsterdam and Rotterdam, where there are large communities of politically engaged migrants. In 2002, in the immediate aftermath of the assassination of Pim Fortuyn, when the issue of migrant cultural assimilation really came to prominence in Dutch national politics, only 22 percent of Moroccan-Dutch eligible voters in Amsterdam and 40 percent in Rotterdam turned out in the national election, but

by 2006 these numbers had risen to 37 and 58 percent, respectively.⁹³ The year 2010 saw a small rise in Amsterdam, to 39 percent, although turnout among Turkish-Dutch voters fell from 51 to 46 percent.⁹⁴ In Rotterdam, turnout among Moroccan-Dutch fell to around 46 percent.⁹⁵ Looking at patterns of representation for these communities, we see a similar pattern of slight decline in the recent election as the number of non-Western city councillors in Amsterdam fell from nine to seven, a decline that means that only 16 percent of the city council has non-Western origins.⁹⁶

Looking at national turnout of ethnic minorities in the Netherlands between 2006 and 2010 confirms this pattern. Although FORUM, an institute for Dutch multicultural research, predicted 44 percent turnout nationally among all ethnic minority groups in 2006, that number was only 34 percent in 2010. There are many possible explanations for this decline, and the one put forth by the organization that carried out the study is that the debate over immigration and integration seemed to have calmed down in recent years, which led to decreased urgency among the migrant populations with regard to voting. Unfortunately, this relaxation in voting habits may result in less accurate representation of these migrant groups, with only 3.1 percent of council members nationally being of migrant origin after the 2010 elections.⁹⁷ This number, while about two percentage points below the percentage of Dutch residents with Muslim cultural origins, is nonetheless about equal to if not greater than the percentage of naturalized allochthonous Dutch.⁹⁸ What this shows is that even though the national political climate of the Netherlands has turned to one of exclusion of newcomers, the electoral structure of the country has made it possible for immigrants to gain representation. As long as this electoral structure remains unchanged, Irene Bloemraad posits that minority representation is “sticky” and can outlast shifts in public opinion against migrants.⁹⁹ What comes of this representation is yet to be seen, and though migrant-origin representatives have thus far been unable to redefine the landscape of the integration debate, their continued presence in the debates and influence in Dutch national policy has the potential to ensure that the Dutch state realizes its responsibility to all of its residents and citizens, not just those that it considers autochthonous.

VI. Conclusion: The Effects of Immigrant Political Involvement on Integration and Acceptance

The ability of nation-states to welcome culturally different immigrants into the governing apparatus of the state will be one of the most important factors in determining the continuing relevance of the state. The experience of immigrants to the Netherlands is affected by the rhetoric of autochthony that predominates in national political rhetoric, but in many ways their presence as civically engaged, publicly minded individuals helps to counter the imagined divide between the foreign and the native that Dutch immigration rhetoric has created. Despite the transnational cultural flows that these immigrants introduce into the territory of the Dutch state and the perception of many that these flows threaten the sovereignty of the Dutch state, the effect of immigrant involvement in politics is not a decrease in the relevance of the state, but rather the heightening of a civic instead of a cultural sense of nationality among citizens. This in turn strengthens the nation-state and helps it adapt to the modern international order of increased migration. However, this involvement also brings complications. At the same time that the introduction of minority groups into the political sphere signifies a high degree of civic integration, it also represents the final infringement of the “other” into the realm of the “natives.”¹⁰⁰

Political integration is one of the best ways to create a sense of civic belonging among migrants. Yet without proper framing by the state, it can increase national apprehensions among

those who see a single Dutch national identity as intricately linked with the state. Evidence for both of these statements can be found in the recent history of Dutch politics: in the fierce opposition to the nomination for Mayor of Rotterdam of Ahmed Aboutaleb, as a result of his dual citizenship, and in the way that migrants disproportionately cast preferential votes for a candidate with a similar ethnic background as themselves. Though Dutch electoral policy still encourages immigrant integration into politics, in recent years it has taken certain steps that make migrant political integration more difficult. In this way it is obstructing the creation of a sense of national civic identity that could help to pave the way for closer inter-cultural interface and mutual understanding within Dutch society.

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