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Programme: European Politics and Society

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Thesis details:

Title: Female perspective on politics: female political representation in The Netherlands and Finland

Is the thesis in your assessment free of plagiarism?

Yes to my knowledge the thesis is free of plagiarism

No plagiarism evident

Can the thesis be made publicly available in the Leiden University Repository?

by A. Escribà-Folch: it can be made public through the repository.

Summary assessment/comments

The thesis is interesting and seeks to address a highly relevant question speaking to an emerging and growing body of literature. These are clear strong points, as well as the many insights derived from the numerous interviews the student managed to conduct.

The weakest points have mainly to do with the lack of a theoretical contribution, original arguments and hypotheses; these things result in a problematic research design and justification of cases, as they lack theoretical grounding and connection to the question at stake.

Criteria

Knowledge and insight

The comments below are meant to be constructive and provide useful feedback to the student.

This thesis examines the underlying causes of differences in the level of female political representation in parliament in two countries, namely, the Netherlands and Finland. The research question is thus highly relevant and speaks to a growing body of literature that analyses the presence of women in political institutions from different perspectives and focusing on alternative factors, from supply to demand ones. The question, though, stresses a so-called top-down perspective, which it is difficult to relate to a theoretical perspective; it just seems to be mentioned because of the empirical approach revolves around interviews. Yet, the method should follow the question and hence not be justified according to the hypotheses developed. The part of "how can this be improved?" should not be part of the research question; if anything, this can be addressed in the policy implications derived from the findings and be placed in the conclusion.

The introduction needs some more focus and does not need to go that far in history to state the relevance of the topic. It should better explain the relevance of the specific research question, using for example, the cases of study analyzed in the empirical section to provide for a puzzle or paradox worth exploring. Further, the introduction should also anticipate and highlight the main contributions of the thesis, both theoretical and empirical. Further, too much focus seems to be put on culture, but then it is dismissed quite quickly, despite cultural differences within western Europe are substantial. I don't think that discussion belongs to the introduction and creates a bit of confusion about that actual focus of the thesis and the approach adopted.

It is worth noting the reflections on positionality that the student develops in the second section of the thesis. I appreciate the honesty of the student in putting forward these factors that are so often overlooked and for doing so in a direct and clear manner.

The literature review looks ok. Again, though, I do not think the discussion on the Middle Ages and past centuries is relevant for understanding current differences in political representation and presence in institutions of women. It takes up some space that could be better used for a more critical discussion of the extant literature, which is big and full of insights. If anything, that part of the discussion should be kept to a minimum and concentrate on the many factors influencing women's access to political positions. The review uses initially a historical perspective as

a main connecting thread, which does not help, in my opinion, situate the current research in the literature to which it is supposed to be speaking to. The review should be theoretically driven and structured by and along the approaches or strands of literature that try to explain or address the phenomenon or process being under study in the thesis, especially those with a comparative perspective.

The conceptual discussion in section 1.2 is sound and detailed, and, importantly, shows a good command of the implications of the literature in terms of clarification and implications of conceptual richness and variation. Section 1.3 is the crucial one in terms of review. Despite it is quite comprehensive, the student shows a good command of the extant literature, many works and recent contributions are still missing. The section ends up being a bit shallow I must say, and should have a more critical approach to the literature so that the student can better situate and, importantly, justify her research and clearly suggest the specific mechanisms and approach to be adopted, based on the accumulated knowledge. The review should engage more with the existing insights, revise them critically, and suggest the pathways for further research by clearly pointing at the elements that need further research. Then the student provides some discussion of the two cases selected. This is interesting but I'm not sure this belongs here. The case selection should be theoretically guided, and hence be discussed carefully in the research design section; it is there that some context about the countries can be provided. By doing it here, the cases are already presented without any real justification for their selection, which is very problematic in my view.

Assessment: good

Weighing: n/a

Application knowledge and insight

In section 2 the author stress that the focus is on descriptive representation. I understand this approach to the conceptual description, but its link to the original research question is unclear. The question is about the causes of female disparity in political representation. The forms of representation would be more relevant for a research question focusing on perception/interpretation of representation and their roles of female MPs or politicians in two countries. I might have misunderstood the point here, but given the question, I do not see why this is relevant. More problematic is the idea of the top-down perspective. The fact that the thesis focuses on interviews of female MPs does not mean a top-down perspective, in the theoretical sense. The views of these MPs do not entail a top-down perspective, only an elite-centered approach, as only women who have managed to access to high representative positions are considered. Also this perspective is not derived from any of the theoretical approaches discussed in the review sections, so it seems disconnected. It just anticipates the empirical approach but not the theoretical one guiding the argument, but without any theoretical grounding of discussion. The thesis has no real theory and, hence, no hypotheses, which is surprising. The second section includes more conceptual discussion than theoretical development. Yet, the usefulness of such concepts, besides some necessary clarification is questionable for being then able to proceed with the analysis. Again, to repeat, the research design chosen should be the result of the theory and hypotheses being tested. But in here, there are no

expectations, which cast doubts on the design of the interviews then, since they do not have a particular purpose in mind in terms of underlying factors or elements to be uncovered by these approach as compared to other existing ones in the literature. These theoretical elements should also guide the case selection, in particular the countries, but this is not the case, which again makes me question about the justification of the two cases, and why they are theoretically relevant.

The research design section includes several subsections describing quite carefully the conducting of interviews, selection of MPs, the design of the interviews. This is a great exercise of transparency on the part of the student that I really appreciate and should be praised. Ethical issues are also addressed, which is very important. However, the most problematic part, as I emphasized already, is the selection of the two countries. They seem to define a certain scope condition based on the fact that both are “progressive” countries. Yet, establishing that condition should be more carefully done and justified as well as based on empirical indicators that help establishing the case of these two countries sharing these characteristics. These could be used to rule out to some extent cultural perspectives so the focus can be on other factors, yet, given the lack of a theoretical focus and clear expectations, the importance of such distinction seems blurred and with little connection to any theoretical claims of discussion. To repeat, case selection should be theoretically driven and there is literature on how to select cases based on expectations that is not considered here.

The student has successfully managed to conduct a quite important number of interviews despite the conditions imposed by the pandemic. There is variety of MPs from different parties or ideological backgrounds. Yet, the purpose of such variety, again, is not grounded on theory or on representativeness (as it is a very small sample). Again, though, such source of variation is not theoretically grounded, as the research question does not place relevance on the ideological differences. Such differences could be relevant in examining the differences on how MPs interpret or view the logic of representation in light of the different dimensions entailed in the concept; but that seems not to be the goal of the thesis either.

The coding of the interviews is relevant and well-conducted, but the explanatory power is a bit diluted by the lack of theoretical focus. The data could have been used in more creative ways.

All comparison sections in the analysis are brief and a bit too superficial in my view. They could have been grouped in a section together that more directly discusses the elements in the two systems that seem to be driving the differences, although the research design does not allow for a comparative approach as such. As a result, any conclusion on this should be read with much caution, as the conclusions are derived from subjective evaluation, not on a comparative design aimed at establishing causal relationships. The research design is only partially useful for answering the research question, especially when based on two countries, whose selection is not related to any theoretical expectation and, then, whose usefulness in pinpointing or identifying some factors is not sufficiently clear.

Assessment: good

Weighing: n/a

Reaching conclusions

The conclusions are fine, although limited by the lack of a real theoretical contribution. They thus lack a clearer connection to existing literature that helps establishing and underscoring the contribution of the thesis. More on the policy implications of the findings could have been done. Especially in terms of generalization and applying the results to other contexts in Europe.

Assessment: (more than) satisfactory

Weighing: n/a

Communication

Overall, the thesis is nicely written, and the language and style are scholarly in general and, hence, correct and adequate.

The author uses footnotes for citations, which is fine, and the style is consistent, although the placement of some of the footnotes is not adequate, such as within parentheses, or in the middle of sentences.

Assessment: very good

Weighing: n/a

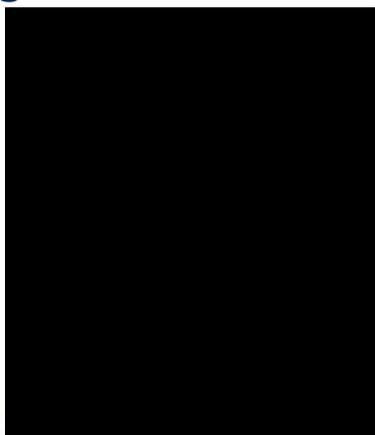
Formal requirements

OK

Final assessment

This thesis is graded with a 7.9

Signatures



A. Escribà-Folch