Public defence Ph.D. in Political Science by Audrey André

The public defence of the Ph.D. in Political Science for Audrey André will take place on Wednesday February 8th, 2012 at 3 pm in the Promotion room, building D, 2nd floor, room D2.01, VUB-Campus Etterbeek, Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussel.

The Ph.D. thesis is called "Electoral Systems and Constituency Representation" (Promoters: Prof. dr. Kris Deschouwer and Prof. dr. Sam Depauw)

Please confirm your attendance by Friday February 3rd to Carine Ladou

Abstract

How and to what extent is the constituency representation of elected representatives shaped by the electoral rules? Much of what legislators do does not involve voting over policy in parliament. Elected representatives across the globe assist individual voters in their dealings with public authorities, visit hospitals and factories, speak at debate nights, and go to the local team’s game. In studying the variety of ways in which representatives seek to connect to and communicate with their constituents, this dissertation bridges the two dominant approaches applied to studying legislative behaviour: rational choice and institutionalism. The rules determining how votes convert into seats not only have important mechanical effects. Elected representatives respond strategically to the incentives and constraints the formal rules generate. Central to legislators’ calculations, Carey and Shugart (1995) famously argued, is the relative value of personal reputations compared to party reputations for obtaining re-election. In particular, legislators’ incentive to seek out personal votes among constituents is expected to decrease with district magnitude in closed-list systems, but increase with the number of co-partisan competitors in open-list systems. The dissertation theoretically revisits Carey and Shugart’s oft-cited model and puts it to the test using a variety of data sources.

The results clearly demonstrate that electoral institutions matter: legislators’ commitment to constituency representation varies considerably with the electoral rules they compete under. In closed-list systems, the effect district magnitude has on various constituency-oriented actions was found to be invariably negative. In open-list systems, by contrast, a straightforward positive relation could not be discerned: while the incentive to cultivate a personal reputation among constituents increases with the scope of co-partisan competition, legislators’ decision to engage in any given constituency-oriented action is conditional upon the specific nature of that action. The findings provide a cautionary note to electoral engineers seeking to strengthen the ties between constituents and their representatives. The psychological effects district magnitude has on representatives are manifold and at times even contradictory. Path dependencies, cultural expectations, and the wider institutional context only add to the complexity. The representative relation was shown to be a dynamic two-way process in which constituents’ preferences for good constituency members interact with what elected representatives do in terms of constituency service. In addition, multi-level systems of government have an effect on legislators’ commitment to constituency representation that is independent of differences in the electoral conditions they face.