PHD SUMMARY & REVIEW

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

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The political decisions we make (or do not make) today affect not only the current generation of voters but also generations of the future as intertemporal policy dilemmas require us to distribute costs and benefits over time (Jacobs, 2011). This is especially apparent in the many long-term policy challenges we face, such as climate change, public debt and pension policies. Yet our current, representative democracies are notorious for their bias towards the present (MacKenzie, 2021). Several institutional dynamics continuously draw the attention of representative democracies to the present and incentivise politicians to focus on securing current-day benefits, while refraining from making policy investments (Boston, 2017; MacKenzie, 2021; Smith 2021).

The issue of democratic short-termism is especially problematic from the viewpoint of justice between generations (Boston, 2017). On the one hand, the presentism of democracies leads to *substantive* intergenerational injustices, since costs and benefits are distributed unfairly across generations. On the other hand, the continued focus on present generations also harms future

generations from a *procedural* point of view. Since future generations are affected by our decisions, their interests should be included in the process of making those decisions (Rose, 2019). However, due to their absence, they risk being overlooked. The aim of this dissertation was to get a deeper understanding of how institutions (and the actors functioning within them) contribute to substantive intergenerational justice, procedural intergenerational justice and democratic presentism.

Even though all democracies, in general, are considered short-termist, not all democracies exhibit this tendency to the same extent. There exists a rich institutional diversity between democracies, and this diversity might explain why some countries are better at producing intergenerationally just outcomes than others. Based on institutional data (cabinet composition, electoral system, party system, federalism, bicameralism, the level of participation and the level of deliberation, see Coppedge et al., 2020; Huber et al., 2004) and an intergenerational justice index (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2019), comprising indicators that measure policy support for both younger and older generations, environmental sustainability, and economic and fiscal sus-

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tainability, the large-N comparative analysis over time shows that the most basic institutional structures matter when it comes to future-regarding policymaking. More specifically, institutions that characterise consensus democracies – such as executive power-sharing in coalition governments, proportional electoral systems, multi-party systems and the institutional openness to societal participation – are more likely to produce intergenerationally equitable policy outcomes than institutions based on majoritarian logics. One notable exception, however, was Belgium. As a prime example of a consensus democracy, it had a medium score on substantive intergenerational justice.

While these results are indicative, it is hard to determine which policy outcomes constitute substantive justice between generations. Therefore, it might be more fruitful to direct our attention to procedural intergenerational justice, or the representation of future generations in our decision-making processes. In response to the alleged underrepresentation of future generations in policymaking, several democratic innovations have been proposed to represent the interests of the unborn. These innovations rely either on specifically mandated representatives or on specifically mandated institutions to represent the interests of posterity. However, it is unclear to what extent current representatives and institutions might already represent the unborn. To research this, I adopted a claims-making approach, by coding explicit representative claims on behalf of posterity in parliamentary documents of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives (2010-2019), and the Belgian Senate (2010-2014).

The results showed that future generations are not well represented in the Chamber of Representatives. Their representation was infrequent, limited to a narrow range of policy domains; dependent on a few critical actors; and the quality of the representative claims was usually low. Additionally, even though the Senate has an explicit mandate to consider the long term, and Senators might be less incentivised to respond to the short-term pressure caused by elections, due to the Senate being less visible and partially non-elected, Senators were not more likely to represent the unborn than members of the Chamber. Even more surprising, non-elected Senators were not more willing to represent posterity than elected representatives.

To better understand why Belgium fails to consider the interests of future generations, in both substantive and procedural terms, I conducted forty interviews with federal and Flemish MPs. The subsequent thematic analysis revealed seven factors that hamper long-term action in many intricate ways: elections and electoral competition, traditional and social media, coalition governments, partitocracy, federalism, the power of interest groups and uncertainty. Electoral competition and the rise of social media, in particular, proved to be crucial factors in explaining the growing focus on the immediate and the neglect of long-term considerations.

In conclusion, the results of this dissertation show that democratic institutions affect intergenerational justice and long-term thinking in complex ways. However, they also demonstrate that the most basic institutions matter for intergenerational justice, and, more importantly, that future generations

can be represented by current actors. What is needed, therefore, are institutionalised and independent innovations designed to transversally voice the interests of those who are yet to come.

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