

Examining Women's Experiences on the Campaign Trail: Campaign Ethnographies in the 2023 Dutch Provincial Elections

A Pilot Study for TWICEASGOOD

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The main research theme of the TWICEASGOOD project is to understand women candidates' experiences of election campaigns. During the provincial elections in the Netherlands, we conducted a pilot study in two provinces. The objective was to explore the appropriate ethnographic methodologies and the opportunity structures using the participatory method to study the everyday experiences of sexism in election campaigns.

Local elections are an important feature of the electoral calendar. They provide an opportunity for voters to express preferences for local leaders; to hold incumbent councils and councillors accountable and they can also serve as referendums on the national government. To be a candidate in a local election requires a great deal of commitment, long hours of campaigning, contesting a local party selection process and negotiating often fractious local politics. During the campaign leading up to the 2023 Dutch Provincial Elections, we conducted a pilot study for our European Commission funded project on women's political leadership. Our objective was to establish whether quick campaign ethnographies (e.g., shadowing candidates, observing campaign events) was feasible, identify challenges and opportunities and assessing whether candidates would engage with our research. This report summarises our methods and initial key findings. We are grateful to our participants as through their engagement we were able to meet our objectives and deepen our understanding of the campaign process.

1. Campaign Ethnography: Practicalities

In the pilot study, we selected two provinces for the provincial elections. We chose two provinces with different urban/rural compositions, cultural context, wealth distribution, presence of a strong local identity, and connection with the national political power in the

Hague. The first selected province (province A) is a so-called ‘randstad’ province that includes larger cities. ‘Randstad’ describes the provinces in the west of the Netherlands and refers to the wider area of cities including the Hague, Amsterdam, and Rotterdam. Simultaneously, the province also has large rural parts. The second province is a periphery province (province B) with a strong local identity, local dialect, and political cultural context. Thirty-three candidates were approached from thirteen parties. We focused on the main national political parties from all sides of the political spectrum and approached three local parties. Of this number, eighteen candidates accepted the invitation for an interview and twelve participated in the observations. Most candidates were both interviewed and observed during the electoral campaign, some candidates however were either only interviewed or shadowed where we conducted informal interviews. Although not all political parties fit the traditional division on political spectrum of left vs. right, we will use this qualification. Fifteen candidates were affiliated with left leaning political parties and seven with right leaning political parties ¹. All participants had an active role in the campaign and were often in the top ten of the candidate lists.

In our participant observation with candidates on the campaign trail, we undertook several observation activities: attending public meetings, political party conferences, shadowing candidates as they canvassed, observing candidates’ interactions with members of the public in the street and on the doorstep, as well as their interactions with colleagues, volunteers, and staff from their respective political parties. We also shadowed candidates during semi-public campaign events, like visits by national party officials to the provinces and the local party chapters or events where the political party presented themselves. Canvassing in the Dutch context ranges from handing out flyers on the streets, especially during busy moments like Saturday food markets or during rush hours at train or bus stations. We combined the observations of these activities with semi-structured interviews with the candidates, as well as more informal ethnographic interviews with their team members, like campaign managers, volunteers, local party board members, and national party members.

The relationship with a candidate started would either develop by emailing them to request an interview or by attending public party events like political party conferences or campaign kick-off events. For those who agreed to an interview, we asked if they would be willing to be observed and shadowed for some or all their activities over the course of their campaign. With some candidates we did an interview and repeated observations before the peak period of the campaign. The peak period of the provincial campaign focused on the two weeks before the elections, from 1st March to 15th March. Numerous debates in public event spaces and visits by national party officials characterized the peak period of the electoral campaign. In province A, the parties also went out canvassing, whereas this was a less popular strategy

¹ Not all national political parties participated in the provincial elections. The following parties we qualify as left leaning: GroenLinks, D66, PvdA, PvdD, SP, CU, DENK, Volt. The following parties we qualify as right leaning: FvD, VVD, CDA, PVV, 50PLUS, BVNL, Ja21, BBB.

in province B. The observations overall took place over a period of six weeks, where some observations focused on the peak period in the two weeks prior to the election. The interactions with our participants started up to three months in advance.

In the peak period, we also established relationships with more candidates and followed them on campaign events. As candidates of various parties would attend the same debate, we often observed multiple candidates simultaneously and would try to speak all candidates afterwards. With several candidates, especially the ones that we shadowed repeatedly, we conducted follow-up interviews after the elections.

2. Initial Key Findings and Observations

Our campaign ethnographies provided important insights about candidates' everyday experiences and how they explained these experiences. The initial analysis we present here emerged from our observation work, the interviews and informal conversations with the candidates and others involved with the electoral campaign. We approached the research by examining how women candidates experience the electoral campaign and where and how they anticipate and navigate negative experiences. Several candidates anticipated and navigated especially campaign activities on social media. Some candidates avoided certain platforms like Twitter altogether, as they experienced these spaces as hostile and uncomfortable. Below we provide some additional detail on our observations.

Political organization and party support:

Support from the party for candidates on the list was central to the navigation of inequalities, injustices, and negative experiences. The candidates largely anticipated negative and hostile experiences, especially on social media, but also while canvassing in the streets. Candidates explained "one needs to have a thick skin in politics" and "there are always angry or grumpy people." The added mental and emotional work was especially experienced where support from the party was lacking and/or the disproportionate burden was dismissed.

Spotlight on women candidates:

Women candidates, especially women of colour, navigate between the expectations from the party and 'their voters.' Several parties want to diversify their candidate list and had list commissions propose candidates of diverse gender, racial, and class backgrounds. Frequently, only a small number of candidates with diverse backgrounds were proposed and nominated on the candidate list, resulting in an increased pressure on these candidates to gain votes from 'their' demographic. Simultaneously, candidates experience increased pressure from their constituents to represent their interests and to bring change in the political system.

Candidates ‘standing proxy’:

Several candidates experienced negative and hostile comments from voters during their campaign. Some candidates were more hesitant to go canvassing, would avoid canvassing by themselves, and would avoid wearing party material while traveling to a campaign event. Candidates explained the negative and hostile comments as not targeted at themselves, but as an attack on politics. Participants argued that hostile or aggressive comments indicated a distrust in the national political system and national political figures. The candidates would function as ‘proxies’ standing in for the national political figures towards whom the aggressive comments were directed.

3. Next Steps

We continue to speak with the participants from the provincial elections through interviews and by visiting the parliamentary sessions of the province. Through our follow-up conversation, we discuss reflections upon the campaign. For those who were not elected, we speak about the experience of the campaign ending. For those who were elected, we speak about adjusting to being elected representative in the provincial parliaments.

- The findings from the pilot study have informed a candidate survey where we are gathering the campaign experiences of a larger sample of all candidates. Through collecting contact details, we shared the candidate survey with many of our participants and other candidates. We want to thank you for your time to fill out the survey.

- The TWICEASGOOD project continues their research, and we will use the findings from this pilot study to inform our fieldwork for the next national elections in the Netherlands. If you would like to participate in our research for the upcoming national elections, you can contact us through our TWICEASGOOD account twiceasgood@exeter.ac.uk.

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We benefitted greatly from the generosity of our participants. We would like to thank all our participants and informants for their time, patience, and openness. We feel it is beneficial to

maintain these relationships to co-produce knowledge about women's political leadership and campaigning. These brief summaries are a way of maintaining contact and we are seeking advice on how to further strengthen our participatory methods and to gain feedback on these initial findings. We invite you to share any of your thoughts or feedback by contacting us through the TWICEASGOOD account twiceasgood@exeter.ac.uk or through our social media.

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