

Els Witte PhD Dissertation Prize 2022

Jury report announcing the winner of the Els Witte PhD Dissertation Prize for 2022 on behalf of the selection committee

It is a pleasure to announce the winner of the Els Witte PhD dissertation prize for 2022.

This year, the members of the selection committee were:

- Vjosa Musliu (Free University Brussels)
- Hortense Jongen (Free University Amsterdam)
- Saskia Ruth-Lovell (Radboud University Nijmegen)
- Matthew di Giuseppe (Leiden University)
- Ferdi De Ville (Ghent University)

This year the jury received 9 dissertations. 8 from Belgian universities, 1 from a Dutch university. All theses were evaluated based on three criteria:

1. Theoretical depth;
2. sound empirical research, and
3. the importance pf the contribution to the field of study in a broad sense.

For each criterion, a mark was given on a five-point scale.

After a careful assessment of all nominated PhD theses, the committee shortlisted four dissertations which stood out in terms of their theoretical depth, empirical rigour, and overall contributions to the field¹:

- Gilles Pittoors (Ghent University): ***Going above and beyond? A comparative case study of the multilevel organisation of national political parties in the EU polity***
- Karolin Soontjens (University of Antwerp): ***Chronicle of an election foretold: Politicians' beliefs about electoral accountability and its effects***
- Ine Goovaerts (Catholic University of Leuven): ***Destructive or deliberative? An investigation of the evolution, determinants, and effects of the quality of political debate***
- Lala Muradova (Catholic University of Leuven): ***Reasoning across the divide: Interpersonal deliberation, emotions and reflective political thinking***

The committee would like to explicitly mention that all the shortlisted dissertations were of high quality. Each of them engaged with topics that are central to discussions in the field of political science: multi-level governance and the democratic deficit, political representation and accountability, and the quality and civility of political debates. All four skilfully combined different methods and came to insights that are relevant from a societal perspective.

¹ In the initial assessment round, these four dissertations not only had the highest overall scores but also scored an average of at least “very good” on two of the three evaluation criteria.

But, as became clear in the final deliberation of the committee, the dissertation of Lala Muradova really stood out among this selection of already very good theses. Lala Muradova discusses in her thesis how citizens can be motivated to engage in reflective political reasoning through interpersonal deliberation. Building on and contributing to literature on emotions from the disciplines of political science and psychology, Muradova develops and tests an original theory of “emotional engagement” that helps to explain when and why participation in structured deliberative forums leads to better political reasoning among citizens. By partaking in mini-publics, citizens may develop positive feelings for other participants and their arguments and in that way engage in “empathic perspective-taking”. The condition for these positive effects is that the deliberative forums should allow for a diversity of viewpoints and for the interplay between fact-based rational argumentation and story-telling.

These empirical findings make a valuable contribution not only to the academic literature but also to policy-makers experimenting with new forms of political participation. Muradova strengthens the real-world relevance of her findings by analysing how benefits of interpersonal deliberation on the micro-level can be scaled-up to the macro-level of the democratic system as a whole.

The committee was particularly impressed by the very ambitious mixed-methods approach applied with enormous rigour in the thesis, combining original qualitative, survey, quasi-experimental and experimental data and analytical techniques. The committee wants to explicitly applaud (although this could perhaps be expected in a thesis on the importance of self-reflection) Muradova’s discussion of the limitations (or scope conditions, as she calls it) of the different components of her study. Finally, the jury wanted to highlight the quality of writing that made the arguments easy to follow and compelling. These qualities are also evidenced by the fact that the dissertation has resulted in a high number of publications.

Many congratulations to the four shortlisted candidates for their excellent dissertations and to this year’s winner – Lala Muradova.