

# LANDS OF OPPORTUNITY? COMPARING POLITICAL MOBILITY FOR MINORITIES IN THE UNITED STATES, EUROPE AND TURKEY

*America's legacy as the "land of opportunity" has recently been symbolically reclaimed. Barack Obama's election shows that in America, political opportunity is within reach for minorities – holding up a mirror to Europe and Turkey. In reshaping more sustainable futures in answer to the global economic crisis, we should be equally concerned with generating legitimate leadership and inclusive access to political power. There is room for reforms and changes in the political landscapes of America, Europe and Turkey. Equal access for political leaders from diverse ethnic, ideological, class and gender backgrounds is a key challenge for democratic countries in the 21st century.*

**Marietje Schaake\***



\*Marietje Schaake is a candidate for the European Parliament for D66, the social-liberal party from the Netherlands. Marietje owns a consultancy business and advises governments, businesses, NGO's and cultural institutions on Trans-Atlantic affairs and diversity issues. [www.marietjeschaake.com](http://www.marietjeschaake.com)

There are a variety of definitions for the term “minority”. Feagin gives five characteristics of a minority group: (a) suffering discrimination and subordination, (b) physical and/or cultural traits that set them apart and which are disapproved by the dominant group, (c) share a sense of collective identity and common burdens, (d) socially shared rules about who belongs and who does not determine minority status, and (e) members tend to marry within the group.<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this article, and to measure the political mobility of various minorities in different ways, the word is not necessarily used to indicate a group that is smaller in numbers; the African-American community in the United States, or “women” after all can hardly be considered numerical minorities. Instead, the term is used to define a subordination in terms of socio-political mobility, opportunity and influence.

### *Living up to the American Dream*

The United States is as much a “construct” as it is a nation. This construct has long been driven by the “American Dream”: the idea that anyone can belong to this nation and make it big, even to the very top, with hard work. This dream suffered a serious blow in recent years, when immigration laws were restricted and Muslim-Americans were considered Muslim first, and then American.

Barack Obama’s Presidency is a significant example that will reinforce the promise of the American Dream. Obama’s message “Yes, we can!” appeals to that distinctive feeling that everything is possible when you work hard, re-enforcing the reward of active, inclusive citizenship. Obama’s global approval had a lot to do with the attraction of this idea. In Europe, some feel that what the Americans *can*, Europeans *cannot*; at least not yet. To Europeans capable of honest self-reflection, it is apparent that the rise of a “European Obama” anytime soon is unlikely. Depending on the country, it may take decades before minorities will be elected into the highest national office based on their merits alone. Even in one of the most progressive European countries, the Netherlands, a poll indicated that only 53 percent of voters would vote for a Jewish Prime Minister. A candidate from various ethnic minorities could count on a maximum of 50 percent of the votes. An Islamic Prime Minister would be accepted by only 27 percent of those polled. The younger generation showed strikingly more tolerance than the older generation.<sup>2</sup>

Electing minorities into higher office is surely not an end in itself for any society, nor should it be. Quality after all should reign over quantity. However, creating equal opportunity and promoting societal ability to transcend characteristics

---

<sup>1</sup> Joe R. Feagin (1984 (2nd edition)). *Racial and Ethnic Relations*. Prentice-Hall, pp. 10.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.depers.nl/binnenland/168933/Nederland-is-klaar-voor-een-vrouw.html>

such as class, race, age and gender when electing political leaders, should be a key objective of any democracy in the 21st century.

### ***Time for a European Dream***

European societies still have an easily identifiable politically dominant group: white upper (middle) class men. Although some will argue, Obama as senator was already a member of the political elite, his election as President shows American society no longer creates political outcomes along dominant identity lines. Surely, Obama's election does not mean discrimination, racism and unequal opportunity problems disappeared on an individual aggregate level, but it does show the American voter is able to vote based on political viewpoints, not inherent features of a candidate. The candidacy of Hillary Clinton should be seen in the same light. A significant blow was dealt to identity politics, and the notion that representatives of a minority population mainly have a constituency with the same identity no longer holds true. Only through alliances across the entire population, based on merit and ideas, were either of the two Democratic candidates able to solidify their success. The more we accomplish election based on merit, the more we truly live up to our respective constitutions and core values in Europe and America, fundamentally rooted in the equality of all men and women.

### ***Much Achieved, More to be Won***

Despite the election of Obama and the quantum leap this meant in terms of mending deep historical scars or ethnic divide, the position of various minorities in the United States still has a long way to go. Clinging especially to (religiously) conservative values is a seemingly vast ingredient for political success in America as running for office as an atheist or homosexual is virtually impossible. In contrast, some European countries already have openly gay jurists, mayors, ministers and even an occasional bishop. These and broader values of individual choice and equal treatment are not yet binding European law but hopefully this will be realized soon. Nonetheless they offer important lessons for American decision-makers.

To belong to a minority group has different implications and consequences in different cultural settings. Comparison of the position of minority groups between the United States and Europe cannot be done simply "one on one". A commonly made comparison between the level of integration and participation of Muslims between America and Europe for example is fashionable but not entirely valid. As part of the heightened attention on Muslims in the West after 9/11, the American government, but also civil society, proudly communicated

the successful integration of Muslims in America to Europeans and “the Muslim World” through public diplomacy. Although on average, American Muslims are socio-economically at least as successful as average Americans, such comparisons are only relevant to a limited extent given the very different backgrounds and histories of Muslims in America versus those in Europe. The dire position of recent labor immigrants from Mexico for example paints a different, bleaker picture. The socio-economic status and lack of opportunity of the latter, as well as inner city challenges, allow for more relevant comparison to the position of various Western European Muslims, who mostly immigrated as labor migrants and still largely belong to the lower socio-economic strata.

Political representation of Muslims in American politics is not significant. Two out of 435 members of the House of Representatives are Muslim converts and were elected in the last few years. Other minority populations are not represented in politics according to the percentages they form in the entire population.

In Europe, immigration started much later than the several gulfs of mass immigration in America, hence the picture is different. Ethnic minorities, many of whom are Muslim, migrated to Western European countries, such as France and the Netherlands, starting in the 1960s. To this day Western European societies face difficulties integrating these minorities fully, which is also reflected by their modest participation in national politics. On the municipal level this is rapidly changing, and with the next generation a different picture will likely emerge. Part of the measure of success will lie in any minority candidate being judged merely on ideas and political success.

### ***Old Boys Networks Rule “Old Europe”***

Currently most European politicians on the national level are white, highly educated men, coming from an upper middle class background, having made their way through the national political party apparatus and parliamentary systems for decades. Opportunity for a more diverse representation and fresh voices in national politics may therefore not become eminent until the entire established generation leaves the scene. This is especially true in a country like Italy, where conservative institutional strongholds limit opportunity and access for progressive, fresh political voices. The fact that political parties across Europe autonomously have the chance to give opportunity to fresh blood does not mean they largely choose to do so.

European examples of (ethnic) minority members in elected national public office are few, but some countries are moving in a more representative direction. For example three ministers in France have an ethnic minority background (all

three being females) as well as a hand full of appointed Senators<sup>3</sup> and Members of European Parliament<sup>4</sup>. Dutch examples are the Undersecretary of Justice Nebahat Albayrak or Rotterdam's Mayor Aboutaleb. The problem is that all of these examples are officially or effectively appointed, not elected.

Out of the Members of Parliament, who are elected, percentages vary greatly among European countries. France has no minority deputies elected to the National Assembly from mainland France, and very few female assembly members.<sup>5</sup> The United Kingdom has several minority ministers below cabinet rank, but only 15 ethnic minorities in the 646-member House of Commons (521 of whom are males).<sup>6</sup> In the 741 appointed member House of Lords, one in 30 is of an ethnic minority, and one in six is female. Furthermore, atheists are underrepresented<sup>7</sup> to an extent that quota are considered. Germany has around 2.9 million inhabitants of Turkish background, 800,000 of them also holding German citizenship after new citizenship laws came into effect. But they have little political representation: a mere 5 members of the 613-seat Bundestag.

Most parliamentary systems make it difficult for young people, underdogs or outsiders to emerge quickly. There are positive examples as well. Finland, Ireland, Germany and Iceland have female heads of state. And in the Netherlands, the percentage of ethnic minorities in the 150 seat parliament corresponds with national percentages of ethnic minorities as part of the entire population.<sup>8</sup>

Cem Özdemir, a Turkish-German politician, currently a Member of the European Parliament, faced trouble getting on the Greens Party's list of candidates for the Bundestag because of internal opposition to his ambition to become the party's leader. In Europe, ethnic minorities are not only missing from legislative politics, but also largely from the media, corporate boards, the executive and the judiciary. Similarly, Barack Obama's election was a quantum leap that does not represent a new balance throughout all American political bodies, let alone American society as a whole, where segregation is still eminent. Obama was the only African-American in the last Senate, the new Senate will have none. Similarly, numbers of other ethnic minorities in politics do not represent national averages in America. His example is strong, his election revolutionary, but does not withstand perpetuating gaps in access and socio-political upward mobility.

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.senat.fr/listes/senatl.html>

<sup>4</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MEPs\\_for\\_France\\_2004-2009](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MEPs_for_France_2004-2009)

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/13/tribun/xml/liste\\_alpha.asp](http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/13/tribun/xml/liste_alpha.asp)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.parliament.uk/directories/hciolists/almc.cfm>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-411991/Lords-quotas-ethnic-minorities-atheists-women.html>

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerleden/alle\\_kamerleden/index.jsp](http://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerleden/alle_kamerleden/index.jsp)

---

### *An Unusual Suspect: Turkey*

Turkey, in many ways, is a unique country. It emerged as a secular nation state from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire, which at the time represented the global Islamic community. Today, Turkey is a long-time NATO member and a candidate member of the European Union. At the same time, there is legitimate criticism on its human rights record. Turkey is generally accepted to be the only democratic country in the Middle East with a majority Muslim population, but it is also the only democratic country where YouTube is legally banned and freedom of press is seriously challenged. Given such challenges, Turkey is not often thought of as a land of opportunity for minorities and for upward socio-political mobility, but there are some surprisingly positive examples.

Overall women, as well as religious minorities, have not made their ways to the (higher) echelons of political office in Turkey. Turkey applied universal suffrage for both sexes since 1933, but today, women make up less than one percent in local political positions (mayors and mayor council members). And only nine percent of the National Parliament is female.

Running on an atheist ticket would be virtually impossible in Turkey, with almost 100 percent religiosity. No politician is known to be openly gay, and Alevites, the largest “religious minority”, as well as small religious minorities such as Jews and Christians are underrepresented in political offices.

Despite the areas that need improvement, some unknown facts about Turkish politicians and their rise to power can be inspiring for both Europe and America. Turkey has already had a female prime minister, and most of the past national leaders –from former president Süleyman Demirel to current Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan– have been self-made men from moderate backgrounds. Class and race have not played limiting roles as can be demonstrated as well with the example of former Prime Minister Turgut Özal who famously used to boast about his mother being Kurdish. Kurds are the largest non-Turkic ethnicity in Turkey. Despite the well-known challenges around the Kurdish issue and the ongoing tensions with the PKK, Turks have elected a Kurdish head of parliament –Hikmet Çetin whose name was often mentioned as a likely candidate for president– and many of the senior ministers in the current government as well as past governments have had Kurdish roots. In fact, roughly one fifth of the Turkish parliament has typically been Kurdish, albeit consisting of parliamentarians from center-right, center-left or Islamist parties and not from the pro-Kurdish Democratic People’s Party (DTP). Also recently, Turkish state television started airing an exclusively Kurdish channel and some initiatives have been taken regarding the political participation of Alevites. Although, there

---

is much room for improvement of minority rights in Turkey, these examples and developments deserve praise.

### ***Need for More Political Upward Mobility in Europe, America and Turkey***

Measured by political representation of minorities, the United States, Europe and Turkey are lagging, and there is a lot of room for improvement if only in mere accessibility of political power. Still President Obama's victory serves as a reminder of the promise of the American Dream when it comes to political representation of minorities on the national level. On the municipal levels in many European countries, increasing numbers of minorities find ways to be politically active and to get elected, which could be a hopeful and telling precursor for the inclusiveness of the next generation of political representation. Similarly, increasing opportunity for minorities as well as current representatives from lower classes in politics in Turkey are signs of hope.

The proper integration and full participation of minorities and people from lower socio-economic classes remain as crucial challenges for Europe. Turkey offers some unexpected and refreshing examples when it comes to opportunity for political mobility of women and politicians from lower classes. President Abdullah Gül of Turkey said recently in German newspaper *Der Spiegel*, that Turkish-Germans "should take part in German society and politics and not look back." President Gül is correct to remind Germans of Turkish origin of their own responsibility to participate in their societies, but the German government is responsible for creating an atmosphere where such participation is rewarded.

Obama's choice to visit Turkey as the first Muslim majority, yet secular country, is highly symbolic. Irregardless of what one might think of their politics, when Obama and Erdoğan shake hands, we can be inspired by the fact that the President and Prime Minister are both political underdogs in their own right, who made it to the highest offices.

Despite the economic crisis, and perhaps because of the economic crisis, key values are redefined. Herein also lies room for reforms and changes in the political landscapes of America, Europe and Turkey. In reshaping more sustainable futures, we should be equally concerned with generating legitimate leadership and inclusive, access to political power.

The younger, more diverse generation, having grown up with an international perspective, knowing a world more interdependent than ever, will need to cooperate and see a common future despite different backgrounds.

Equal access to political leadership for people from diverse ethnic, religious, ideological, class and gender backgrounds remains a key challenge for democratic countries in the 21st century.