

VACANCY FOR 4 PHD RESEARCHERS ON DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

The **Department of Political Science** and the **Institute for European Studies** of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) are hiring four PhD researchers for several projects on democratic governance.

Profile

- Holder of a Master degree in Political Science or related field in Social Sciences and Humanities. Last year students are encouraged to apply, at the condition that they obtain their MA-degree before the start of the scholarship; i.e. October 1st, 2018.
- A good command of English, both in writing and speaking.
- Specific skills are required for each of the research themes (see below)

Offer

The **PhD grants** are for four years. You will become an actively contributing member of the VUB's Strategic Research programme on 'Evaluating Democratic Governance in Europe' and of the interuniversity Excellence of Science Project on 'Representation and Democratic Resentment'.

Starting date is October 1st, 2018.

Deadline for applications is June 30, 2018.

Interested?

Questions regarding the PhD scholarships can be addressed to professor Kris Deschouwer (Kris.Deschouwer@vub.be).

Applications should include:

- a letter of motivation clearly indicating for which of the theme(s) you are applying
- a full CV (including degrees obtained for each study year, the title of your MA-thesis, and, when applicable, a list of publications, relevant courses taken, and conference presentations)
- a project outline, including a central research question and research design (maximum two pages); if you apply for several of the themes, a project outline for each of them is needed

Theme 1 - Democratic myopia and the environment/climate/sustainable development

We invite projects that investigate the causes and consequences of “democratic myopia” in Europe as regards environmental and/or climate policy. Democratic myopia here refers to the institutionally in-built tensions between short-term election cycles of democratic governance systems (generally 4-5 years) and the long-term nature of important environmental challenges such as climate change and the management of natural lands/resources. How can democracy be shaped so that long-term challenges such as environmental degradation, environmental restoration/conservation, and climate change can be effectively addressed? We are interested in project proposals that help us understand and manage the dynamics of the tensions inherent in democratic system. Projects should therefore examine the political, institutional and other conditions that foster or relieve this tension (e.g. participatory mechanisms, innovative management/democratic practices, etc.) or may actually compound it.

Projects may investigate single case studies or take a comparative perspective (e.g. across different countries) and may explore democratic myopia at different levels of governance, including the supranational EU level (e.g. links to the EU reform debate). A strong European angle is a prerequisite, as is an empirical focus on environmental/climate policy.

Specific requirements for PhD candidates: none

Theme 2 - Brussels’ youth: enacting citizenship

Projects under this theme seek to produce new insights into how young people in the Brussels Capital Region (Belgium) understand and enact citizenship. To this end, research is conducted on the relationship between political discourse on citizenship, the institutions that engage with such discourse (e.g., politics, law, police, education and media), and youngsters’ political performances, understood broadly as actions, events or forms of behaviour that demonstrate youngsters’ self-conscious relationship to what it means to be a citizen. Performances, in this sense, can range from participating in civic or political organisations, blogging, making consumer choices, to becoming a foreign fighter, endorsing the use of violence or engaging in violent manifestations. The Brussels Capital Region makes for an interesting case: reflecting its multi-linguistic, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic character, Brussels features prominently in political discourse on citizenship, multiculturalism, violence and radicalization.

We are particularly interested in the relationship between youngsters’ understandings of citizenship, their feelings of resentment, and their use or endorsement of violence. The project preferably draws on qualitative methodologies (interviews, focus groups, participant observation, field research, visual methodologies) but can rely on existing survey sources (i.e. the 2018 DEBEST school survey that taps into feelings of resentment).

Specific requirements for PhD candidates: In order to conduct research in the Brussels region, the successful candidate masters at least Dutch or French (ideally both) and is willing to improve one’s command of the other language. Previous experience with qualitative methodologies is an asset.

Theme 3 - Opposition to gender equality in Western Europe

Oppositions to gender equality are on the rise in Western Europe. New ‘anti-gender’ movements have arisen, referenda on fundamental rights have been observed and numerous threats to equality policies and equal opportunity structures have been registered. Also labelled an ‘ethical backlash’, these forms of opposition target a broad range of issues, including challenges to abortion, transgender rights, marriage equality, antidiscrimination policies, feminism, women in politics, and even the notion of gender itself. The region is also facing a populist wave, which tackles some of the aforementioned issues, as well as other founding principles of the European political model. These new oppositions are striking because they contradict commonly held assumptions that Western Europe is on an unstoppable way towards ‘full’ gender equality. This project takes stock of these developments and asks how we can understand the nature, rise and impact of this new phenomenon.

PhD candidates will study oppositions to gender equality in Western Europe, preferably using a comparative approach. They will collect and analyze new data on oppositional discourses, attitudes, networks and/or strategies. They can study the phenomenon from different methodological angles, using either quantitative and/or qualitative methods.

Specific requirements for PhD candidates: none

Theme 4 - Diversity policy in universities: gendered and racialized normativities

‘Diversity’ has become a common paradigm in education to understand and study the challenges posed by groups vulnerable to discrimination based on their ethnic minority background, disability, sexual orientation, social background and gender. ‘Diversity’ as a discourse and social practice is however also criticized for its failure to break the institutional habits governing universities that are often resistant and even hostile to diversity. Projects under this thematic header investigate the normative views about human nature, epistemology and what it is to be a ‘proper’ student/staff member underpinning diversity policies in higher education and how it impacts on the (non-)performativity of the policies. They examine how diversity policies counter or reproduce gendered and racialized normativities, and how these may limit or facilitate the potential for institutional change.

PhD candidates conduct an institutional ethnography at one or multiple universities, preferably including the VUB. They conduct an in-depth analysis of policy discourses and practices regarding diversity, equality and difference. In case multiple universities are included, PhD projects can set out to compare a variety of ‘academic cultures’ and their particular takes on diversity.

Specific requirements for PhD candidates: the successful candidate masters the languages of the selected university/ies; previous experience with qualitative methodologies is an asset.

Theme 5 - Multiculturalism, post-secularism and the politicization of ethical debates

Moral pluralism is both a prominent feature and a basic challenge for democratic societies. Yet, ethical issues often become politicized and are increasingly framed as a ‘multicultural dilemma’. Such oppositional framings reproduce political binaries that align but also diverge from previous liberal/progressive and religious/conservative divides. Projects under this thematic header set out to understand the politicization of current controversies in the European context (for instance, on boys’ circumcision or religious slaughtering of animals), the role of different actors and institutions (including medical and bio-ethical advisory committees), and who is represented in this.

Projects may investigate a particular topic or take a comparative perspective, across different countries or/and by comparing different issues. They engage with theoretical frameworks on gender/intersectionality, bioethics and contextual political theory. Data on public discourses, actors and organizations can be collected by using different qualitative methods.

Specific requirements for PhD candidates: previous experience with qualitative methodologies is an asset.

Theme 6 – Disadvantaged groups’ feelings of being (mis)represented

Even if people are well represented substantially and agree with the present procedures of democracy, they may still not *feel* adequately represented. Feeling represented is a matter of representatives and representations being accepted (or not) by the population as their legitimate spokespersons and concerns perceptions, identifications, and emotions. We expect that negative feelings towards representatives are most prevalent among groups that are disadvantaged due to an array of reasons such as socio-economic position, ethnicity, religion, culture, or gender. We welcome research projects focusing especially on disadvantaged groups and systematically comparing these groups with mainstream population segments, to understand whether and how citizens feel represented by their representatives.

The project’s methodology consists of focus group methodology and individual interviews with disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged groups living in the Brussels Capital Region. The disadvantaged subpopulations include: Muslims; citizens with a Central African background; impoverished white Belgians dependent on welfare; retired persons with modest incomes; white youngsters living in poor urban areas; non-white youngsters living in poor urban areas; new immigrants.

Specific requirements for PhD candidates: In order to conduct research in the Brussels region, the successful candidate masters at least Dutch or French (ideally both) and is willing to improve one’s command of the other language. Previous experience with qualitative methodologies is an asset.