# VB VAN POELJE AWARD 2021

# JURY REPORT

*Presented at the NIG Annual Conference, 14 October 2022*

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Dear all,

Today we are happy to announce the winner of the 45th Van Poelje Award. This Van Poelje prize is awarded for the best dissertation in the field of public administration in The Netherlands and Flanders. The prize is named after one of the founding fathers of public administration – Gerrit Abraham van Poelje (1884-1976).

The jury is composed of members from various universities and one practitioner, many of them previous winners: Taco Brandsen (Radboud University), Ellen van Bueren (Delft University), Bert George (Ghent University), Sanneke Kuipers (Leiden University), Albert Meijer (Utrecht University), Will Tiemeijer (WRR & Erasmus University Rotterdam), Esther Versluis (Maastricht University), and Steven Van de Walle (KU Leuven).

The jury read 28 dissertations that we considered to belong to this longlist for a prize in public administration; one more than last year. 29% of the books were defended at Flemish universities, and 71% at Dutch universities. Three quarters of these books were article-based or of a hybrid form, while one quarter was written as a monograph. The trend towards increasing numbers of article-based dissertations continues.

The jury read some 7,000 pages on a wide range of interesting topics in the broad field of public administration. While previous years' dissertations often focused on domestic (Dutch or Flemish) cases, this year it is clear that the PhD researchers broadened their scope again. While there still is a considerable amount of research done on local cases, this year the jury also learned about property rights in China's forest sector, INGOs handling of conflicts in South Sudan, and HR autonomy in public hospitals in Pakistan.

Overall, we considered the quality of the 28 books that we read as high this year. We appreciated the dissertations that use a wide variety of methods and disciplines in one book, as for example in

the work of Koen Migchelbrink on public managers' attitudes toward public participation in administrative decision-making. We were impressed by high levels of ambition, comparing many cities on several continents, as done by Wei Yang analyzing transport policy packages. We enjoyed exploring innovating methodological designs, and would like to praise the use of serious games by Fernando Kleiman to analyze the attitudes of civil servants towards open governmental data provision. Particularly in article-based dissertations, it is important to be capable of coherently bringing together several (at times rather different) studies. We consider the work by Maxim Chantillon on digital transformation of public administration as exemplary in that respect.

Last year's jury report discussed the 'relevance versus rigor' debate, and we offered a plea for broader reflections beyond the own case. This year's observations continue along this line. As observed, the quality of the Dutch and Flemish dissertations in the field of public administration is very high. All dissertations are very solid in their research design and are methodologically rigorous. We would like to think that this relates to the developments that the field of public administration as a discipline has undergone in the last decades. With the maturing of our own discipline, we now hope that there is more attention again for the wider world beyond public administration. We see many dissertations that only to a limited extent go beyond exploring the literature outside our own public administration traditions. This limits the opportunities for wider reflections that make academic research so relevant and interesting. So, in line with last year's plea, we believe that dissertations in the field of public administration would benefit from a wider exploration of relevant literature in other disciplines. And particularly some article-based dissertations could improve in providing a well-written introduction that does precisely this: go beyond the niche of the own small research topic, and narrate about the 'big picture' and outline the wider relevance of the work done.

After discussing the 28 books on the longlist – each book being read by three of the jury members – we selected three books to be nominated for the shortlist. These three finalists were read by all jury members. We read 2 Flemish and 1 Dutch contribution, and interestingly enough all 3 focus on the level of the individual civil servant. Both schools of more large-N behavioral design, and small-N ethnographic approaches are visible in our shortlist. This illustrates the behavioral turn in public administration research and the importance attached to the human factor in policy processes.

In alphabetical order, the following dissertations were shortlisted for the Van Poelje prize 2021.

1. *Marija Aleksovska – Utrecht University*
   *Under watchful eyes. Experimental studies on accountability and decision-making behaviour in the public sector*

How do accountability mechanisms shape decision-making behaviour in the public sector? This is the core question Marija Aleksovska sets out to answer in her dissertation 'Under watchful eyes'. She starts from the observation that public accountability does not always lead to the desired effects, and we thus need to know more about the individual behavioural mechanisms. Staying close to the traditional accountability literature, Marija tests her assumptions using vignette experiments amongst public administration alumni and students, as well as civil servants in the UK and the Netherlands. These vignette experiments are well executed and this dissertation's contribution particularly lies in its methodological design and implementation Theoretically, the jury felt more room for further exploration would have been possible, and the conclusion could have more explicitly outlined what practical lessons we have now learned from these experiments.

2. *Lars Dorren – Antwerp University*
   *Analysis as therapy. The therapeutic function of ex ante analyses in infrastructure policy processes*

Labelled as the most original work on the shortlist by the jury, this dissertation aims to turn the heat up under the rational approach to decision-making and questions why we actually use ex ante policy studies. Providing an answer to this highly relevant question is no easy endeavour. Lars Dorren argues that classic explanations stemming from naivety and usefulness theory do not sufficiently provide the answer, and thus we need to explore alternative explanations. His ethnographic approach in which he analyses three large infrastructure projects in the Netherlands and Flanders using participant observation, provides a convincing answer to his question. The interpretative and at times rather eclectic methodological approach does, however, lead to the feeling that there is still some unfulfilled potential in this dissertation. Lars concludes that ex ante evaluations might mostly be symbolic, but they are very important because of their therapeutic function. The jury particularly appreciated the critical and original approach to this phenomenon of ex ante evaluations.

3. *Sylke Jaspers – KU Leuven*
   *By the public, for the public? Coping with value conflicts in the co-production of public services*

How do public and professionals deal with the potential desired and undesired effects of co-production? In her exploration of this broader topic, Sylke Jaspers aims to shed light on the role

of individual coping with value conflicts. In doing so, she is theoretically ambitious, and brings together the up until now relatively separated literatures on co-production and coping. This results in a strong conceptual model outlining how individuals cope with value conflicts. The jury would like to praise not only the theoretical contribution hereof, but also the potential practical use for, for example, teaching purposes. Also methodologically, the dissertation is ambitious. With each sub-question and article using a different methodological approach, Sylke manages to combine case studies, interviews, document analysis, a survey and a vignette experiment. All in all, this results in a remarkable and solid, well-structured dissertation that shows clear practical relevance. The rather abstract work could have been brought a bit more lively, though, providing a more engaging introduction, some anecdotes and more pronounced conclusions.

As always, only one book can win. While the high quality of the three books on the shortlist made it difficult for us to choose, we opted for the book that was most complete and demonstrated the most innovative own contribution. Based on her attempt to develop a new conceptual model, strong multi-method approach, and solid execution, this year's winner of the Van Poelje award is

**Sylke Jaspers for her book *By the public, for the public?***


*Prof.dr. Esther Versluis, chair, on behalf of the jury:*

*Prof.dr. Taco Brandsen, Prof.Dr. Ellen van Bueren, Prof.Dr. Bert George, Prof.Dr. Sanneke Kuipers, Prof.dr. Albert Meijer, Prof.Dr. Will Tiemeijer, Prof.Dr. Steven Van de Walle*