

VB VAN POELJE AWARD 2024

JURY REPORT

Presented at the NIG Annual Conference, Leuven, February 5-6, 2026

Dear all,

Every year the Vereniging voor Bestuurskunde awards 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 in The Netherlands – Gerrit Abraham van Poelje (1884-1976). Although it is now already February 2026, the 48th Van Poelje award pertains to the best dissertation of the calendar year 2024.

The jury is composed of members from various universities and one practitioner: Martiene Branderhorst (City of The Hague), Wouter van Dooren (University of Antwerp), Tamara Metz (Delft University of Technology), Steven Van de Walle (KU Leuven), Jan-Kees Helderman (Radboud University), Toon Kerkhoff (Leiden University), Thomas Hoppe (Twente University), and Brenda Vermeeren (Erasmus University Rotterdam). My name is Stephan Grimmelikhuijsen from Utrecht University, chair of the jury.

The jury read no less than 36 dissertations on the longlist. After a meagre harvest of 2023 (with only 18 dissertations), we were glad to have an expanded number of jury members this year to take up this gargantuan task. This productive year, and perhaps also next year (which is actually last year) may be caused by a post-covid bump. On behalf the VB I would like to thank the jury members for their hard work in assessing all dissertations. In particular, a big thanks to Wouter van Dooren who after many years of service will hand over the baton as jury member. We welcome Ellen Wayenberg (Gent University) as our new member.

The longlist of 36 dissertations highlights the ‘big tent’ that is public administration. It was a rich set of dissertations with clear influences from anthropology, sociology, psychology and history. The jury read some 9,000 pages on a wide range of interesting topics in the broad field of public administration. Topics ranged from water management, organizational reform, multi-level governance, digital government, civil servant creativity to trust. The overall quality of dissertations

was once again high. Five out of 36 dissertations were written in Dutch compared to only 1 last year. The writing was (still) untarnished by the tentacles of GenAI. The authors show their own voice in their writings, although the jury expresses their worry for its overly use in the coming years, possibly leading to uniformization and superficiality in writing, reading and thinking. The use of GenAI in writing should be done with great care and caution.

After discussing the 36 books on the longlist – each book being read by three of the jury members – we arrived at a selection of four books that stood out as favorites. The four nominees on the shortlist were read by all jury members. Notably two of the dissertations are classic monographs, and one dissertation is a hybrid monograph/article form. One dissertation was article-based. The shortlist is extremely diverse in terms of topics: water management, ministerial cabinets, welfare state and street-level bureaucracy are on the list. One procedural remark: One of the dissertations on the shortlist was supervised by one of the jury members. To ensure a free and fair deliberation, this jury member left the room during the deliberation of this dissertation, and did not provide a written assessment of the supervised dissertation beforehand.

In alphabetical order, the following dissertations were shortlisted for the Van Poelje prize 2024

1. Lieke Brackel, *Brackish Waters: Integrating Justice in Climate Adaptation and Long-Term Water Management*, defended at Delft University of Technology. This PhD research investigates climate adaption and water management in coastal areas where fresh and saline water meet (brackish waters). The dissertation uses the capabilities approach developed by philosophers like Nussbaum and Sen to empirically analyse justice claims in water management. Notably, it introduces a philosophical and ethical perspective into public administration, with an empirical approach that is still somewhat uncommon to public administration but shows clear potential for innovation.
2. Arthur Meert, *The politics of decabinetisation in Napoleonic systems: a process-tracing analysis*, defended at KU Leuven. This dissertation is a classic monography delving into the question why ministers reduce their ministerial cabinets of political advisors. Why would they ‘cut in their own meat’, so to speak. This work has a well elaborated comparative perspective with thorough institutional analysis. The ‘ministerial cabinet’ phenomenon is becoming more and more relevant in the Flemish context. The methodology is a very detailed and thorough process-tracing approach of two cases in two Napoleonic traditions: Greece and Portugal. There are a lot of potential lessons in this dissertation, also for Flanders and the Netherlands, where we see an increasing importance of political advisors and ministerial cabinets.

3. Lianne Visser, *Customized Interactions. How street-level practitioners, managers, and policymakers accomplish and challenge the provision of customized social services*, defended at Radboud University. This dissertation investigates a classic but highly important question in this age: how can government organizations deliver customized services without falling prey to arbitrariness? It strongly builds and extends street-level bureaucracy theory, by focusing on practices and the relational aspect of street-level service delivery. The dissertation develops the idea of minimal structuring, which enables flexibility in service delivery without losing structure. In addition, an excellent and in-depth ethnographic study is at the heart of this dissertation.
4. Emil Wolff, *Social Subjecthood. The inclusion of (post)colonial migrants in Dutch, French, and British welfare states, 1945-1970*, defended at Leiden University. This dissertation contains a detailed yet very readable historical and comparative analysis of the relation between migration and the welfare state. The relevance of this research is that it increases our understanding of how processes of in and exclusion are shaped in political debates and policy formation. It highlights that it is the construction of boundaries on ‘us’ and ‘them’ that undermine welfare solidarity and not migration as such. The dissertation has strong literary qualities, and its historical account is thorough with important lessons for today’s debates on migration, inclusion and welfare.

All four books are excellent, and it was hard for the jury to decide. The jury has an honorable mention for *Social Subjecthood* by Emil Wolff for its thorough, engaged and very well-written historical and comparative account of welfare state in and exclusion. But, only one book can win. Eventually, we opted for the book that was really at the heart of public administration practice and theory, with a strong methodological contribution to public administration on ethnography. Therefore, this year’s winner of the Van Poelje award is:

Customized interactions by Lianne Visser.

Congratulations!

dr. Stephan Grimmelikhuijsen, chair, on behalf of the jury:

dr. Martiene Branderhorst (City of The Hague), prof. dr. Wouter van Dooren (University of Antwerp), prof. dr. Tamara Metzge (Delft University of Technology), prof. dr. Steven Van de Walle (KU Leuven), prof. dr. Jan-Kees Helderman (Radboud University), dr. Toon Kerkhoff (Leiden University), prof. dr. Thomas Hoppe (University of Twente), and prof. dr. Brenda Vermeeren (Erasmus University Rotterdam).