

## **Els Witte PhD Dissertation Prize 2026**

*Jury report announcing the winner of the Els Witte PhD Dissertation Prize for 2026 on behalf of the selection committee*

It is a pleasure to announce the winner of the Els Witte PhD dissertation prize for 2026.

This year, the members of the selection committee were:

- Nicolas Blarel (Leiden University)
- Ruth Carlitz (University of Amsterdam)
- Bram Wauters (Ghent University)
- Chendi Wang (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) - Chair

This year, the committee assessed a very strong set of 15 nominated dissertations. After a careful assessment of the nominated PhD theses, the committee shortlisted five dissertations which stood out in terms of their theoretical depth, sound empirical research, and significant contribution to the field at large:

- Dr. Léon Acar (UGent / KU Leuven) - Better together? Exploring public value co-creation in public services
- Dr. Kathleen Brown (Leiden) - Deception, risk, and evasion: The politics of sovereign debt in emerging markets
- Dr. Jonathan Collins (Leiden) - A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing: A Mixed-Methods Analysis of the Far-Right Alt-Tech Social Media Movement
- Dr. Margot Kersing (EUR) - The Digital Welfare State: A multi-sited investigation into the implications of data-driven governance for benefit recipients, frontline bureaucrats, and the municipal government
- Dr. Zahra Runderkamp (UvA) - Personal institutions, political lives: Diversity without inclusion in Dutch politics

The committee would like to explicitly mention that all the shortlisted dissertations were of very high quality. Each of them engaged with topics that are central to contemporary political science and public administration, and each made a distinctive contribution to its respective subfield. Léon Acar offered a theoretically informed and empirically careful study of public value co-creation in public services. Jonathan Collins advanced the study of far-right digital communities and Alt-Tech platforms through an original account of decentralised sociality. Margot Kersing provided a rich multi-sited analysis of how data-driven technologies reshape welfare governance and public service delivery. Zahra Runderkamp made a major contribution to the study of representation, gender, ethnicity and politics, and democratic inclusion. Kathleen Brown pushed forward research in international political economy by developing new ways to study sovereign debt politics, risk, and state agency in emerging markets.

The jury's decision was therefore difficult, especially given the exceptional quality of the close runner-up, Dr. Zahra Runderkamp. Runderkamp's dissertation is conceptually powerful and societally important: it shifts the study of descriptive representation from access and presence to the wider political lifecycle, including retention, dropout, institutional belonging, and the conditions under which minoritized politicians can remain in office. Drawing on rich and innovative mixed-method evidence from Dutch politics, including maiden speeches, media coverage, interviews, archival materials, resignation letters, and dropout data, the thesis makes a major contribution to research on representation, gender and politics, and democratic inclusion.

After extensive discussion of the shortlisted theses, the committee decided to award this year's prize to **Dr. Kathleen Brown**'s thesis entitled "Deception, risk, and evasion: The politics of sovereign debt in emerging markets".

Brown's dissertation is an outstanding example of theoretically ambitious and empirically inventive international political economy research. It examines how sovereign debt politics works when consequential state actions - hiding liabilities, manipulating risk, and evading constraints - are difficult to observe. By placing debtor governments, international financial institutions, and citizens in strategic interaction under conditions of deception and uncertainty, the thesis advances a broader account of accountability, state agency, and international constraint. The thesis also makes a valuable empirical contribution by putting the focus the perspective of low-income governments from the Global South which face a different set of choices and shows why and how they adopt counter-intuitive strategies when facing debt distress (at least based on conventional wisdom). The committee valued its creative measurement strategies, original empirical evidence, and capacity to open new research agendas on sovereign debt, hidden state action, and the political economy of emerging markets. For this combination of theoretical originality, empirical sophistication, and broad disciplinary relevance, the committee judged Brown's dissertation to be the strongest submission.

Many congratulations to the five shortlisted candidates for their excellent dissertations, and to this year's winner: **Dr. Kathleen Brown!**