

Summary

Diversity in permanent government advisory boards

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The Dutch government receives advice on a wide range of policy fields from 17 permanent advisory boards. Seven of them are strategic in nature and ten have a technical/specialised character.

The Advisory Boards Framework Act states that appointments to advisory boards should seek a proportionate representation of women and people from ethnic or cultural minority groups. In this report, the Court of Audit investigates the recruitment and selection efforts taken by advisory boards to achieve this ambition and what results they have booked.

Our audit shows that the increased diversity sought for permanent advisory boards has stagnated in recent years. The proportion of female members increased from 25% in 2003 to 38% in 2019 but has been virtually unchanged since 2010. The way figures are recorded on cultural diversity prevented us from forming an accurate picture of members from ethnic and cultural minorities. The representation of ethnic and cultural minorities was about 9% in 2009 but fell to 4% in 2016, the last year in which the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (BZK) published this information. Since 2018, moreover, it has not published figures on the number of male and female members of advisory boards.

This is a second change in how the ministry reports on equal representation in the Central Government Annual Report on Operational Management. The Ministry of BZK suffices with an overall picture of the male/female balance at all 30 advisory boards (both permanent and temporary) currently subject to the Framework Act. These overall figures do not provide an insight into the effort that must be made to bring about proportionate representation on permanent advisory boards.

Our audit found that the measures taken to promote proportionate representation differ significantly from one ministry to another and from one advisory board to another. The chairs and secretaries-general of the advisory boards and the ministers and state secretaries concerned take more action to promote the proportionate representation of women than they do to promote the proportionate representation of people from ethnic and cultural minority groups.

Networks play an important role in reaching potential new members. Networks, however, are used in different ways. On the one hand, some permanent advisory boards actively approach people who their members think are suitable: candidates outside the members' network do not get a chance to apply. Such co-option is at odds with the transparency and diversity sought by the Framework Act for advisory boards. On the other hand, some advisory boards successfully use their networks and go to extra lengths in order to promote diversity. They use strategies to identify

the scarce talent, for example by targeting networks of women who are already under consideration. They work to a quota or actively inform potential candidates of upcoming vacancies.

Another important finding is the lack of transparency: a complete dataset was not available for our audit. We also noted that the ethnic and cultural background of the members of advisory boards has not been recorded since 2016 and the number of men and women on advisory boards has not been recorded since 2018.