

Women in Politics in Western Europe

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Introduction

Historically, Western Europe has been both at the forefront of, and most resistant to, women's representation in politics. Many cite Western European movements and thinkers as the first to articulate ideas of political rights for women – indeed, one of the grievances of the famous list presented to the Estates General during the French Revolution included rights for women, and suffragist struggles in Europe were some of the most famous, inspiring activities across the globe.¹ And yet, Switzerland in 1970 was one of the last countries in the developed world to extend the right to vote to all women. More contemporaneously, today only the Netherlands makes it into the top twenty countries in the world for women's representation in parliaments, with the UK placing the lowest as 61st. Thus, despite the rich history of thought and action around women in politics, there is still much to be done, with resistance to change a common theme.

In the hope of exploring the current status of women in politics in Western Europe more closely, this article will first consider the number of women in parliaments and how they get there (or not), and second the place and practice of women in politics: once in power what difference do women make, especially in advocating for the female citizens that they represent?

How Many Women?

The last few decades has seen big shifts in the representation of women in politics around the world, and Western Europe is no exception. Whereas the regional² average of women in parliaments³ was 20.7% in 1997, as of November 2014 it had increased by over 50%, to 31.2%. Western Europe's place in the world however, as mentioned in the introduction, has dropped significantly. In 1997, three countries made the top ten, and five the top twenty. The entire region was within the top 50 countries in the world for women's representation. By 2014 however, *no* country in Western Europe was amongst the top ten and only one in the top twenty.

¹ Further, writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft in England and Theodore Gottlieb von Hippel in Germany were amongst the first in recorded history to outline a theory of politics that called for women's inclusion. See Martin Pugh, "Martin Pugh charts the Women's Movement's origins and growth 1850-1939," *History Review* 27 (1997).

² Western Europe is here defined as Germany, France, Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland, Italy and the UK.

³ Lower, or single house – as per IPU definitions. <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif-arc.htm>.

This relative lag compared to the rest of the world is not due to a lack of significant change – the regional average has increased by over 10 percentile points, and every country has increased by at least 7 percentile points (with most increasing by more – see Table 1). The fall in rankings then, speaks to the *speed* of increase in women's representation, with other regions rising in the league table of women's presence much faster. In 1997, the global average of women in lower houses was 12.7%, and it is now 22.2% – almost doubling the level of representation.

This comparatively slow rise in representation is a multifaceted and complex issue. Central to it, however, is the relative lack of substantial and robust gender quota provisions in the countries of Western Europe. As significant research has demonstrated, gender quotas has been a central factor in the increasing levels of women in elected office.⁴ Scholars categorize gender quotas into three types: legal candidate quotas, voluntary party quotas, and reserved seats.⁵ Only one country in Western Europe (France) has any kind of legal candidate quota – a legal provision that imposes a rule on all parties about the minimum level of women that should be put forward as political candidates. All seven of the countries under discussion, however, have at least one party with a voluntarily imposed gender quota for their candidate selection.

The impact of all gender quotas – both legal candidate and voluntary party – is very much dependent on the design of the quota provision, and the simple fact of a quota existing is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for a gender-balanced parliament, as research on Western Europe and elsewhere has demonstrated.⁶ For legal candidate quotas, both the mandated level of representation and the punishment for non-compliance are key to determining the resultant levels of women represented in the elected body.⁷ In the case of France, when the gender quota law that applies to parties does not dictate what kinds of seats (whether they are likely to be won by the party or not) the party places women in, scholars have found that women tend to be in less “safe” seats, meaning their chance of actually winning are often low. This helps to explain the low levels of women's representation in France, despite their more far-reaching quota – as of 2014, only 26.2% of the lower chamber was made up of women, and France ranks 6th out of the 7 countries in the region (and 47th in the world).

⁴ See Mona Lena Krook, *Quotas for Women in Politics: Gender and Candidate Selection Reform Worldwide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁵ <http://www.quotaproject.org/aboutQuotas.cfm>.

⁶ Emelie Lilliefeldt, *Political Parties and Gender Balanced Parliamentary Presence in Western Europe: A two-step Fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis* (Sussex European Institute, 2009).

⁷ Rainbow Murray, Katherine A. R. Opello, and Mona Lena Krook, “Why Are Gender Quotas Adopted? Parity and Party Pragmatism in France,” *Political Research Quarterly* 65 (2012): 529-543.

Just like legal candidate quotas then, when it comes to the party quotas, not all quotas are made equal. In the case of party quotas, the electoral success of the party (or parties) utilizing a quota is central to determining the effect of party quotas on the overall system gender balance of the parliament. This was evident in the UK, where the Labour Party's "All-Women Shortlist" served to double the number of women in the House of Commons in the 1997 election. The All-Women Policy recognised the difficulty of increasing women's representation if women are not placed in "winnable seats", and so commits the party to placing women in at least half of all "winnable" seats being contested. The robust quota design was important, but it was only impactful on the level of representation in parliament when coupled with the overall success of the Labour Party in 1997, with a landslide victory and majority of the seats in the House of Commons. Many small parties, in Western Europe and elsewhere, have voluntary party quotas that though principally conducive to increasing the levels of women's representation have little effect on the gender balance of parliament due to the lack of seats these small parties can win.

In addition to quotas and the partisan composition of a parliament, there are a multitude of other contributing factors surrounding the political system, such as the electoral system, which contribute to women's representation. Research has suggested that Proportional Representation (PR) systems are more conducive to the election of more women into parliament – a pattern that is borne out in the case of Western Europe. The Netherlands, which leads the pack in Western Europe in terms of proportion of women in parliaments, utilizes a list PR system. List PR systems, which see multiple parliamentarians elected from a party list, are much more conducive to effective quotas – allowing for the party to simply demand that a certain percentage of each list be women. By contrast, the UK has the lowest representation of all of the countries under discussion here, and uses a "first past the post" system. The single-member districts that go along with this electoral system certainly make quotas – at the party or legislated level – more difficult to implement. Where there is only one spot up for grabs in a given locale, the introduction of a provision that ensures women are represented means that in some places men are necessarily entirely excluded (rather than remaining a portion of a candidate list). This dynamic is seen in the UK, where the difficulty in implementation is often cited by the other parties who have decided not to follow Labour's lead in introducing an internal quota for selection.

The broader conditions in which politics operates are also considered as important in understanding the levels of women's representation. In particular, women's place in society and the economy is key to understanding their place in politics; when women are in the occupations that many consider as making them "eligible" for office, they are more likely to enter politics.⁸ In the case of Western Europe, Mateo Diaz compared measures of women's socioeconomic progress and levels of women's representation in parliaments. Though the two are correlated, she notes that the relationship is certainly not sufficient to understand

⁸ Jennifer L Lawless and Richard L Fox, *Girls Just Wanna Not Run: The Gender Gap in Young Americans' Political Ambition* (Washington, DC, 2013).

the complex dynamics both in society and within politics that are entailed in the level of women's representation in politics.⁹ It is clear though, that a pool of qualified and educated women in society is key to enabling the possibility of women in politics; in this regard, Western Europe is amongst the most hopeful regions in terms of future potential of women's representation. Given the correct political context – with parties, parliament, and selection systems conducive to encouraging women to come forward – there is surely great hope for increasing the ranks of women in elected bodies.

What are the Women Doing?

A look at women in politics in Europe is not complete without an analysis of not only how many women are elected, but what the women who get into legislative chambers are actually able to, and chose to, do once in power. What difference, if any, does a more gender-balanced parliament make?

There is significant evidence that, across Western Europe, the presence of women in parliaments has changed the institutions that they sit in, and at times women have been seen to promote a divergent policy agenda to that advocated by men. In the case of the UK, Catalano found a difference in the areas of focus between men and women; women MPs were more than twice as likely as their male counterparts to participate in debates on health-care.¹⁰ As Catalano notes, women voters prioritize social issues such as healthcare more than male voters – perhaps reflecting the traditional association between women and caregiving. In this way, we can see patterns emerging when more women are in parliament, with more voice to issues that may not have previously have been given as much import in (even more) male-dominated parliaments. Similar findings were reached in studies of a region of the UK – Northern Ireland. In interviews with female elected officials, Cowell-Meyers found women to be “more concerned than men with issues of healthcare, childcare, education, and eldercare.”¹¹

Further, there is evidence of some (limited) effect of the presence of women in parliaments on increasing the advocacy surrounding issues more explicitly related to women constituents. Scholars have noted that in the 1970s in Germany, female legislators fought for divorce reform that specifically benefited women.¹² In the UK, Childs found in interviews with female British Labour MPs that they often purposefully focused on issues of particular importance to women, and saw it as an obligation on women to raise some issues; one MP

⁹ Mercedes Mateo Diaz, *Representing Women: Female Legislators in Western Europe* (ECPR Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Ana Catalano, “Women Acting for Women? An Analysis of Gender and Debate Participation in the British House of Commons 2005–2007,” *Politics & Gender* 5, no. 01 (March 09, 2009): 45.

¹¹ Kimberly Cowell-Meyers, “Gender, Power, and Peace: A Preliminary Look at Women in the Northern Ireland Assembly,” *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*, 2001, 72.

¹² Kimberly Cowell-Meyers, “Women in Northern Ireland Politics: Gender and the Politics of Peace-Building in the New Legislative Assembly,” *Irish Political Studies*, 2003, 415.

said “I don’t see men lining up to talk about childcare, never have; [I] don’t see men lining [up] to talk about women’s rights to abortion, never have.”¹³ Childs’s interviews also highlighted another way in which women may be better placed to represent their female constituents. In an interview, another female Labour MP described an instance where a constituent discussed the issue of rape with the MP: “I felt she found it easier to talk to me than she may have a male MP.”¹⁴ This aspect of representation – the interaction between representative and the represented – is an important part of the role of an elected representative. Gender-balanced parliaments, as we are increasingly seeing across Western Europe, serve to change and hopefully improve this relationship.

However, women in parliament do not automatically flock towards so-called “women’s issues”. For example, though research by Bird found that, on average, women were more likely to ask a higher proportion of parliamentary questions about issues that disproportionately affect women¹⁵, they also asked questions on a range of topics. Further, not all women displayed this tendency; more women in parliament is by no means a guarantee that women’s political interests will be better articulated in parliament. The success of this representation of women’s issues depends on a range of factors – including the political ideology of the women in parliament and the party balance of that parliament, as well as the willingness of parties to promote and support their women MPs. In the Netherlands, for example, Koning found that there was a connection between women’s presence and substantive policy actions on behalf of women – but only amongst representatives from some parties and not others.¹⁶

This complexity in the relationship between the number of women in parliament and policy outcomes for women has led some scholars to call for a movement beyond the idea of “critical mass” (which sees a critical number of women as necessary for women to make a difference) to the idea of “critical actors” – which instead posits that even when small in number, well-placed and dedicated actors, both male and female, can alter the course of policy discussion in favour of the women’s issues for which they advocate.¹⁷ This is seen in some of the examples where women have “made a difference” in politics, working for the interests of women specifically. In the UK, Childs and Withey offer the example of the feminine sanitary taxes.¹⁸ Here it was key actors who consistently pushed on the issue,

¹³ Sarah Childs, “‘Attitudinally Feminist’? The New Labour Women MPs and the Substantive Representation of Women,” *Politics* 21, no. 3 (September 2001): 181.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹⁵ Karen Bird, “Gendering Parliamentary Questions,” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 7 (2005): 353–370.

¹⁶ Edward A Koning, “Women for women’s sake: Assessing symbolic and substantive effects of descriptive representation in the Netherlands,” *Acta Politica* 44 (2009): 171–191.

¹⁷ Sarah Childs and Mona Lena Krook, “Analysing Women’s Substantive Representation: From Critical Mass to Critical Actors,” *Government and Opposition* 44, no. 02 (January 02, 2009): 125–145.

¹⁸ S. Childs, “The Substantive Representation of Women: The Case of the Reduction of VAT on Sanitary Products,” *Parliamentary Affairs* 59, no. 1 (November 04, 2005): 10–23.

rather than the voting power of many women combined, that made a difference. Increasing the number of women in parliament increases the chance of such critical actors emerging, but ultimately the process is more complex than numbers alone. This important balance, of both a “critical mass” and “critical actors” is played out in the case of France. Opello finds that the number of “women-friendly policies” increased when women held a majority of local council seats. She notes, though, that the policies resulted not from the power that came with a higher proportion of women elected, but were “primarily” due to the critical acts of certain officeholders – both male and female.¹⁹

The phenomena of critical actors as a key variable in understanding positive change for women is especially clear where there are prominent women in politics who appear to change the gender landscape via their prominence. There have been a number of prominent leaders emerging in Western Europe in recent years, Chancellor Angela Merkel being the most obvious example – but the pattern extends beyond only Germany. Italian politics, for example, has seen a rise in the number of prominent women in leadership positions in recent years, which some have suggested is both an indicator and cause of a shift away from the traditionally male-dominated and macho style of politics in Italy. This is exemplified in Laura Boldrini, President of the Chamber of Deputies, who has been notable for her advocacy around domestic violence and women – something that most politicians have avoided addressing.²⁰

The role of women as representatives can also extend beyond their legislator role, where parliamentary systems mean that a portion of legislators also make up the government. Traditionally, in line with the make-up of the parliament, executives have been heavily dominated by men. More recently though, there has been signs of change; in Switzerland in 2010 for the first time women outnumbered men in the executive.²¹ This comes only four decades after Switzerland finally granted women the right to vote, showing that political history does not determine, though it certainly shapes, the future path of women’s representation.

Looking Ahead?

To conclude, it is clear that the process of getting women into parliament and seeing women’s views represented in political debate and policy outcome is a complex one. Both sympathetic actors and a conducive political context are required. Western Europe though, has many reasons to be hopeful. Proportional representation, the electoral system that research suggests is most helpful to increasing women’s representation, is prevalent across the region. The status of women in society and the economy is such that there is an ample talent

¹⁹ Katherine A R Opello, “Do Women Represent Women in France? The Case of Brittany’s Regional Council,” *French Politics* 6 (December 2008): 321-341.

²⁰ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/simona-aimar/rise-of-women-in-italian-politics>.

²¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/sep/22/switzerland-female-ministers-cabinet>.

pool of potential politicians across the region. And the recent emergence of critical actors who are committed to advocating for women in politics and for issues that women voters wish to grant more attention to offers hope of these conducive conditions being turned into positive steps towards a more politically gender-balanced region.

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Table 1: November 1997 and November 2014 respectively. Compiled from IPU ‘Women In Parliaments’ Archives

	1997		2014	
	% Women in Parliament	Global rank	% Women in Parliament	Global Rank
Germany	26.2	8	36.5	21
France	10.9	41	26.2	47
Netherlands	31.3	5	38.7	16
Austria	26.2	8	32.2	27
Switzerland	21.0	15	31	33
Italy	11.1	49	31.4	30
United Kingdom	18.2	19	22.6	61
Regional Average	20.7	-	31.2	-