

FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN POLITICS AND THE EFFECT OF QUOTAS

When asked why it is so important to him to have a gender-balanced cabinet, newly-elected Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau's curt reply was: "Because it's 2015" (Kolb 2015). He had already previously stated on several occasions that he wanted to appoint a cabinet that "looks like Canada" and hence reflects the composition of the Canadian society. Trudeau's reaction clearly shows that, for him, having a gender-balanced cabinet is a natural condition that does not require any further explanation.

Data from around the world indicates that having a similar share of men and women in political positions, which would represent the composition of most societies, is an exception rather than the rule. This means that debates and policies in fields of special interest to women tend to be neglected while topics more important to men dominate. Chen (2010) argues that there are traditional differences in the preferences of women and men and shows that increasing the representation of female legislators leads to higher government spending on education, health and social welfare.

The following essay presents some figures on female representation and explores the effects of quotas for women in the European Union (EU).

Female representation in politics

Women's representation in politics worldwide has grown slowly but steadily over the past few decades (see Figure 1). It still remains, however, far below parity.

As of January 1st 2015 only five countries in the world had 50 percent or more women in ministerial positions (Finland, Cape Verde, Sweden, France, Liechtenstein). In the EU the average at that time was 28 percent, while it was 35 percent in the EU-15 (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2015). A similar picture emerges for women in other important political positions: in 2013 women constituted around 26 percent of all members of parliament in the EU and seven percent of prime ministers. Table 1 features several figures on women's representation in political positions in the EU in 2013.

Gender quotas in the European Union

Quotas are deemed to be an effective way of quickly increasing women's political representation and a widespread measure in the EU (Quota Project 2015). Within the EU three countries implemented such quotas in their constitutions (Croatia, France, Greece), while nine others added them to their electoral laws. In 19 countries major political parties introduced voluntary quotas,¹ sometimes in addition to legislated quotas. Only five countries did not introduce gender quotas of any kind.

Figure 2 displays the share of women in parliament in every EU country at two different moments in time.

¹ Voluntary party quotas are a powerful measure, because parties have the power over nominations. This makes them the gatekeepers for increased women's representation since voters in most European countries are left to decide between different lists of pre-determined gender proportions (EU Directorate-general for internal policies, 2013).

Table 1

Overview of women in political positions in the EU

Women in political positions (2013)	EU-28	EU-15	Northern Europe	Western Europe	Eastern Europe	Southern Europe
Ministerial positions	28%	35%	35%	35%	16%	24%
National Parliament Members	26%	31%	30%	31%	18%	24%
Regional Assembly Members	32%	34%	23%	27%	23%	17%
National Prime Ministers	7%	13%	25%	17%	0%	13%
Major party leaders	10%	12%	11%	19%	3%	6%

Note: Northern Europe: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden, United Kingdom;
Western Europe: Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Netherlands;
Eastern Europe: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovak Republic;
Southern Europe: Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain.

Source: DICE Database (2015); allocation of countries following UN Statistical Commission.

Figure 1

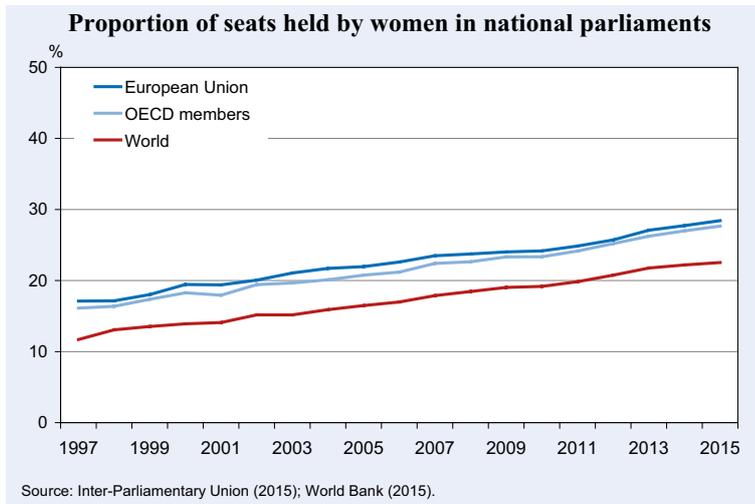
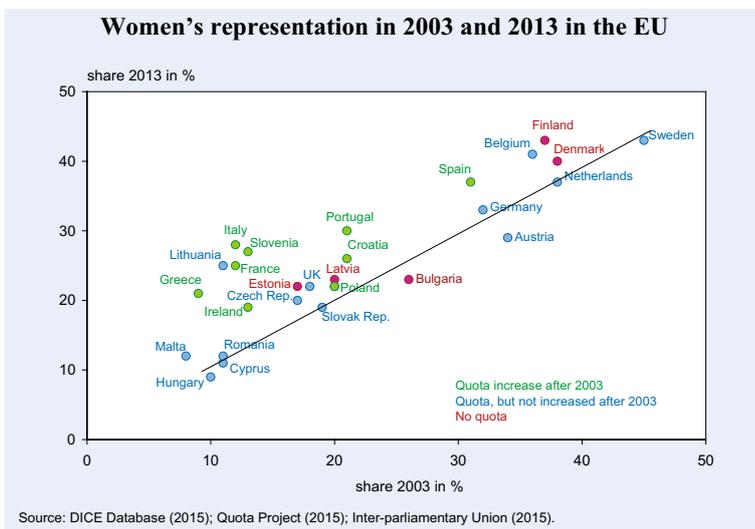


Figure 2



The X-coordinate of any point describes women’s representation in 2003, while its Y-coordinate displays the same information for 2013. A point located on the black diagonal indicates that women’s representation in the corresponding country’s parliament was the same in 2003 and 2013. All countries lying below the diagonal experienced a decrease, while all lying above it experienced an increase in their share of women in parliament.

The figure also contains information about the implementation of quotas in the corresponding country. A blue dot indicates that a country already had a quota installed in 2003. Countries represented by a green dot introduced or increased² quotas between 2003 and 2013;

² To increase a quota in this context means switching from voluntary party quotas to legislated quotas or making a quota significantly more strict and binding.

and a red dot means that the country does not use any quotas at all.

There seem to be two groups of countries: one group had over 30 percent of women in their parliaments in 2003. It consists of less than one third of all countries and most of them experienced a moderate increase or decrease in women’s representation of five percent or less. The remaining countries had a share of less than 30 percent of female members of parliament in 2003 and nearly all of them increased their share of women until 2013, by more than five percent in several cases. All countries that introduced or increased a quota in the time frame under consideration increased their share of women in parliament.

The figure suggests that there is a correlation between the introduction or increase of a quota and women’s representation in the EU. Most countries increased their share of women until 2013, but those countries with new or increased gender quotas saw the greatest increase (see Table 2). They were those countries with the lowest female representation on average in 2003, and therefore

those with the highest potential for increase, but by 2013 they had overtaken the group of countries that already had quotas in place. Average female representation in the five countries with no quotas remains highest in both 2003 and 2013 due to Denmark and Finland, which have a long tradition of high female representation and never implemented quotas.

An analysis of Figure 2 gives a rough overview of the relation between quotas and women’s share in parliaments, but leaves several aspects of quotas untreated, which should be addressed in a comprehensive study. The data only shows whether a quota was implemented or not, and does not account for its magnitude or for the penalties for non-compliance with it. But these aspects certainly influence women’s representation. In some countries non-compliance of an electoral list with

Table 2

Women's representation distinguished by the use of quotas			
	Average 2003	Average 2013	Average increase
No quota	27.6%	30.2%	2.6%
Quota, but not increased since 2003	22.1%	23.9%	1.8%
Quota increase since 2003	16.9%	26.1%	9.2%

Source: DICE Database (2015); Quota Project (2015); Inter-parliamentary Union (2015).

gender quotas leads to its rejection, which usually has a powerful disciplinary effect on political parties, since the rejection of their list usually suspends them from an election. In other countries there is a monetary penalty for non-compliance. France uses fines at a national level, but rejection of the list at a local level. The evidence shows that representation of women is remarkably higher at the local level than at the national level, although the quota is 50 percent in both cases. The big parties prefer to pay the penalties instead of complying with quota regulations at national level. This leads to the conclusion that rejection of the list is the more effective tool, if there is an independent electoral authority that is given the legal competence to reject lists and also actually makes use of this power (EU Directorate-general for internal policies 2013).

Conclusion

In most countries around the world women's representation in politics is far lower than their share in the population. In 2013 only 26 percent of members of the EU national parliaments were women. Most European countries have implemented quotas on female representation in politics, which vary in design and scope. This short analysis suggests that countries that implemented or increased quotas within the last ten years experienced an above-average increase in the share of women in their parliaments. The magnitude of this increase depends largely on the scope and the accompanying sanctions for non-compliance with the quota.

Moritz Linder

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