



THE GENDER OF CITIZENSHIP IN EUROPE

The feminization of European political personnel and parity in Europe

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ABSTRACT

In Europe and elsewhere, women were for a long time excluded from political positions. The majority of European states granted women the right to vote and run for office only after the First World War, with this right being obtained even later in certain countries. For all that, the right to run for office was not accompanied by a massive presence of women in the political field. While a feminization of political classes has been underway in recent decades—in connection with mobilizations for parity and the establishment of binding quotas for parties and electoral rules—it remains highly variable in Europe, being more effective in Northern European countries, parties on the left, and for the least prestigious offices. The political field still remains more of a male world.

In Europe and elsewhere, women were for a long time excluded from political positions. The right to “*monter à la tribune*” (mount the rostrum), called for by Olympe de Gouges in 1791 (*Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen*), was refused to them. During the nineteenth century, politics was considered to be a male sphere. Aside from a few queens—such as Victoria in the United Kingdom (1837-1901) or Wilhelmine in the Netherlands (1890-1948)—women were often assigned to the home and maternity. In 1906, Finland became the first European country to grant women the right to vote and run for legislative elections. Yet it took until after the First World War for the majority of European states to grant women the right to vote and run for office. In certain countries this right came later, for instance in France and Italy, where it was obtained only in 1944 and 1945, respectively.

Winning the right to run for office was, for all that, not accompanied by a massive presence of women in assemblies and governments. A few female pioneers in ministerial positions bear mentioning: Alexandra Kollontai (1872-1952) in the USSR, People’s Commissar for Social Welfare between 1917 and 1918; Miina Sillanpää (1866-1952) in Finland, Minister of Social Affairs between 1926 and 1927; Margaret Bondfield in the United Kingdom, Minister of Labour from 1929 to 1931; Federica Montseny (1873-1953) in Spain, Minister of Health and Social Affairs from 1936 to 1937; or in Léon Blum’s administration in France from 1936 to 1937 with Cécile Brunschvicg (1877-1946), Under-Secretary of State for Education, Suzanne Lacore (1875-1975), Under-Secretary of State for Child Protection, and Irène Joliot-Curie (1897-1956), Under-Secretary of State for Scientific Research.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, women were largely in the minority among political personnel

in Europe. Until 1970, there were less than 10% of women in the lower chambers of most European countries. A relatively slow and gradual feminization of the political class subsequently began, coming earlier and being more effective in Northern European countries as opposed to post-communist ones (see Table 1). These national disparities have also tended to be present within the national delegations to the European Parliament (see Figure 2). Overall, the share of women is lower in the countries that were part of the most recent European Union (EU) enlargements: the Swedish, Finnish, Irish, Danish, and Austrian delegations had greater parity than the Cypriot, Estonian, Lithuanian, and Hungarian ones.



Figure 1. Share of women in national parliaments (single or lower chamber). Sources: Inter-Parliamentary Union, and D. Stockemer, 2007.



Figure 2. Share of women in the lower chamber and the European Parliament per European Union country

The presence of women in European government became widespread during the postwar period, doing so first in Eastern Europe (Yugoslavia in 1945, Romania in 1946, Bulgaria in 1947, and Albania, Hungary, and the German Democratic Republic in 1949). Taking place in more or less gradual fashion, the feminization of the political personnel of European countries is a general trend today, reflecting the mobilizations for equality over the last thirty years as well, as the establishing of binding quotas for political parties (in Germany, Sweden) or electoral rules (Spain, France, Ireland, Portugal, etc.). While the feminization of European political personnel is well established, parity is still far from being achieved. For instance, very few governments and no lower chambers of EU countries have achieved parity; emblematically, the body of EU Commissioners in 2018 included just one-third women (9 out of 28). The share of women in the most prestigious political positions has even tended to stagnate in a number of countries that were relatively ahead in mobilizing for parity. In Germany, the percentage of women in the Bundestag rose sharply during the 1990s, but has not grown since the early 2000s, and even fell to 31% in 2017. And even in countries where parity was inscribed in the constitution, it is often incentivizing and non-effective; for instance, in France, with only 42% of candidates for the 2017 legislative elections being women, a number of government parties (the Parti socialiste and even more so Les Républicains) preferred paying financial penalties than adhering to full parity.

Beyond national differences, the feminization of political personnel exhibits certain characteristics. First, it often takes place through parties on the left. Still today, parties on the right are much less feminized, and green parties are often the most feminized. Second, feminization is never homogeneous within the national political field. It is more effective for less prestigious positions (offices such as local or regional council members) than more prestigious ones (mayors, national parliamentarians, ministers, heads of state and of government).

The feminization of political personnel also raises the question of the differences between women and men, with respect to both their profiles and their investment in the political field: are women in politics similar to the men? Studies on the subject show that for a given political position (government, parliament, local executive), the primary observed difference is the lesser experience of women in politics: they are a little younger than their male counterparts, and have spent less time in politics as representatives—especially local ones—or as political assistants (associates for representatives or permanent associates for a political party). Yet overall, the social

profiles of female politicians do not differ greatly from those of their male counterparts, as they are also mostly from privileged social categories, and are the holders of advanced degrees (former senior-ranking civil servants, senior management of companies or government agencies, teachers, and the professions). Feminization is not accompanied by a social opening of political recruitment.

Other variations should be emphasized with regard to the exercise of office and the division of political work. Women who succeeded in breaking the “glass ceiling” occupy the most prestigious positions within assemblies and governments less frequently. Very few become a head of government, president of parliament or local executive, town magistrate, or president of a political group or commission. And when women do hold the prestigious office of president of the republic, it is often when this position serves a representative function with no major executive power, as was the case with Kersti Kaljulaid (1969-), President of the Republic of Estonia since 2016, Vaira Vīke-Freiberga (1937-), President of the Republic of Latvia between 1999 and 2007, or Mary Robinson (1944-) and Mary McAleese (1951-), who respectively served as President of Ireland from 1990 to 1997 and from 1997 to 2011.

Women and men were also not homogeneously distributed across the various delegations and commissions. Women were most often in charge of ministries, delegations, and permanent or parliamentary commissions relating to social, educational, cultural, or rights-related matters (women’s rights, civil liberties), but were little promoted in the prestigious and regalian domains of economic affairs, foreign affairs, or defense. Catherine Ashton (1956-) and Federica Mogherini (1973-) were thus an exception when they served, one after the other, as the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (2009-2014 and 2014-2019), as was Michèle Alliot-Marie (1946-), who served successively in France as Minister of Defense, Minister of the Interior, Attorney General, and Minister of Foreign and European Affairs 2002-2011. In a world that remains highly masculine, political leaders such as Margaret Thatcher (1925-2013), the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1979-1990, Édith Cresson (1934-) in France between 1991 and 1992, and Angela Merkel (1954-), the German Chancellor since 2005, are still rare. The European Parliament, which has served as an avant-garde figure with regard to the presence of women, has elected only two female presidents out of fifteen since universal suffrage elections began in 1979: Simone Veil (1927-2017) from 1979 to 1982, and Nicole Fontaine (1942-2018) from 1999 to 2002.

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