

The Gender Issue in Belgian Party Politics and Elections

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Every country deserves to have the best possible leader and that means that women have to be given a chance to compete. If they're never allowed to compete in the electoral process then the countries are really robbing themselves of a great deal of talent.

—Madeleine K. Albright

Abstract This article looks at how female politicians in Belgium, driven by a strong women's movement, have sought to achieve gender parity in politics. The first part explains the system of legislated candidate quotas introduced in 1994. The second part deals with the way the Flemish Christian Democratic party and its women's movement, which greatly contributed to the establishment of the quota system, have used the new legal framework to raise awareness and promote female candidates during and beyond election campaigns. We will conclude that both adequate legal conditions and a proactive stance towards women's empowerment on the part of political parties are crucial to achieving gender parity.

Keywords Gender – Political participation – Elections – Women's movement – Quotas – Agenda setting – Christian Democracy – Awareness raising

Introduction

Women represent more than 50% of the world's population but continue to be under-represented as voters, electoral candidates, officials and political leaders. Several countries have realised that the problem is not a lack of knowledge, experience,

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ambition or talent on the part of women and have adopted policies to increase women's involvement in politics. In Belgium, as we will explain in this article, the quota act of 1994 marked a real breakthrough.

Legislating quotas to ensure female participation in parliament is a crucial step towards gender parity in numbers, but it can only provoke qualitative change if women, both voters and candidates, are empowered to take up their issues and concerns and have them reflected in the political agenda. The Flemish Christian Democratic Party (Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams, CD&V, formerly CVP) has done this by placing significant value on the representation of women within its party structures. This has resulted in the statutory recognition of the party's women's movement, Women & Society (Vrouw & Maatschappij, V&M). In this article, we will focus on how the movement attracts female candidates and gains support from voters, especially female voters.

Increasing women's political participation

According to the world classification of women in national parliaments, compiled by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), only two countries in the world have parliaments consisting of 50% (or more) female members: Rwanda (women account for 56% in the Chamber of Deputies and 39% in the Senate) and Andorra (50% of representatives in the General Council are women). Only 30 countries in the world have 30% or more female parliament members (IPU 2013a). Scientific research has proven that a critical mass of about 30% is necessary for women to make a difference in politics (Dahlerup 1988).

The equal participation of women in politics is crucial because women's rights are human rights. The principles of equality and non-discrimination require that women enjoy the same political rights as male citizens. Equal rights, however, are not synonymous with equal opportunity. Since the introduction of female political rights (both as voters and candidates), women's participation has been on the rise, but gender parity is far from being achieved.

Democracy cannot truly deliver for all of its citizens if half of the population remains under-represented in the political arena (NDI 2013). In states where women do hold political office, higher priority is given to issues that particularly affect them and their families, such as well-being and health, the work–family balance, and the prevention and elimination of (domestic) violence. It is usually female politicians who put these items on the agenda.

Other important reasons for increasing women's political participation relate to political culture (women tend to work differently and can bring new ideas and values to the table), human capital (a more balanced participation increases the chances of finding the most suitable person for a position) and the important role model created by female politicians for women in other areas of society.

Legislated candidate quotas: A Belgian success story

Several countries have acknowledged that equal participation will not come about naturally and have adopted policies to increase women's involvement in politics. Of the IPU list's top 10 countries, 6 have some sort of quota system in place. Four countries have opted for voluntary political party quotas (Sweden, South Africa, Nicaragua and Iceland), one has legislated candidate quotas (Senegal) and one a reserved-seats system (Rwanda). Belgium ranks seventeenth with women representing 38% of the members in its House of Representatives and 41% women in the Senate, considerably better than the world average of 20% (IPU 2013a).

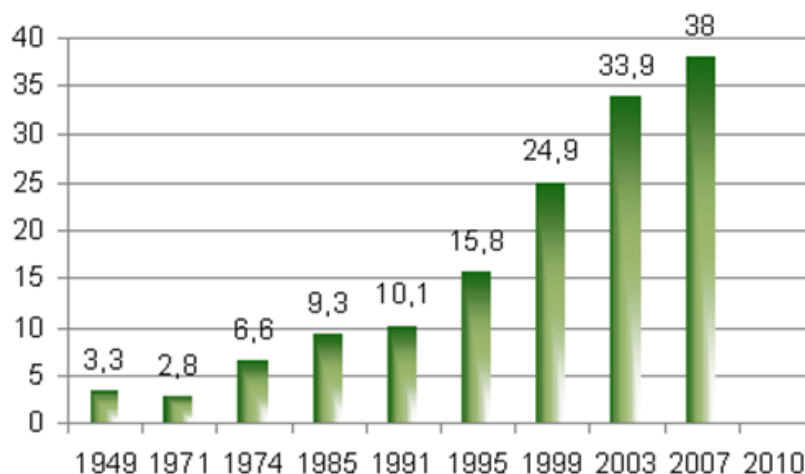
In Belgium, women were only granted full political rights in 1948. For 25 years after that, the number of female members of parliament never exceeded 5%. Whereas, after the Second World War, women's participation in education and the labour market increased rapidly, politics remained a man's world. The first feminist movement of the early 1970s marked a turning point by raising awareness of the importance of voting for female candidates. Consequently, the 1974 elections saw the number of female members of parliament double from 5% to 10%. Due to the lack of support for rules to increase

women's political participation at that time, this situation went unchanged for more than two decades, after which the quota act of 1994 marked a real breakthrough.

Awareness that gender parity would not come about naturally has meant that rules were proposed to speed up the influx of women into positions of political decision-making. The Flemish Christian Democratic women's movement was not initially supported by its own party leadership when it attempted to include a gender quota in the party statutes. Opponents stated that quotas violate the democratic principles of equality and non-discrimination because political office should be based on merit and not on other factors such as gender, which would lead to an unfair selection. Advocates of a quota system countered that quotas increase democratic legitimacy because they provide a correction to the hurdles women face in trying to become elected officials or political leaders, thus allowing more voices to be heard.

Eventually, the Minister of Equal Opportunities, Flemish Christian Democrat Miet Smet and the Minister of Home Affairs, Flemish Social Democrat Louis Tobback, adopted what has become known as the Smet-Tobback Act. This law allows only two-thirds of all candidates on an electoral list to be of the same sex. Right from its introduction, the quota law implied that the non-observation of these rules would inevitably lead to nullification of the proposed candidate list.

Figure 1 Number of women in the Belgian federal parliament from 1949–2007



Source: Rosadoc (2009)

In 2002, the Belgian Constitution was changed to include this phrase: 'Equality between men and women is guaranteed'. The simultaneous introduction of the new Article 11 bis (dedicated to the promotion of equal access of men and women to political office) has provided an explicit constitutional basis for affirmative action. Accordingly, the quota act was strengthened and now states that political parties must put forward an equal number of female and male candidates. Moreover, the top two positions on the list must include one man and one woman. Since 2006, the quota act also applies to local elections.

There are some unique aspects of the Belgian system that need to be taken into account when explaining the success of the quota acts. First, it should be stressed that the most recent quota law not only imposes a 50–50 quota for every election list, but also a requirement for the two candidates at the top of the list, stating that the first two titular and substitute candidates may not be of the same sex. Another interesting feature is the enforcement mechanism. Unlike in other countries, Belgian electoral law does not give parties the option of ignoring the quotas by, for instance, paying a fine. Election lists that are not compliant will automatically be nullified, hence preventing political parties from participating in elections if they are not willing or able to observe the quota rules.

It is also important to mention that the Belgian quota rules fit in well with the proportional electoral system. In addition, the decision to geographically expand the constituencies, which was taken a few years after the introduction of the quota law, has had a reinforcing effect. Even if candidate lists are not closed in the way they are in some countries, the fact that the electorate can cast a vote for a list and also for preferred candidates has not undermined the effectiveness of the quota system. Last but not least, the quota rules apply to elections at all political levels, including the federal parliament, regional parliaments and local councils.

Quotas should not be used as a stand-alone measure, however. The Belgian example is one in which quotas have been integrated in a global policy for women's empowerment. This policy includes scientific research to provide statistical evidence on

women's representation, informing the public and gathering support for affirmative action, and the empowerment of women through, for instance, civil society. The important role of the Flemish Christian Democratic women's movement in raising awareness for female election candidates will be highlighted in the next section.

Vote women! Making women's empowerment real

The Flemish Christian-Democratic party places high value on the representation of women. This is the positive outcome of a long emancipation struggle organised by female party members which led to the party's women's movement, V&M, becoming a fixed department in the party structure.

The recognition of the movement covers the following three elements: First, party statutes guarantee the representation of V&M in the party's governing bodies at all levels. Moreover, it is required that at least one-third of the members in all supra-local party organs are women. Second, the Christian Democratic women's movement has the right to organise separate campaigns and speak with its own voice. Third, the women's movement has its own budget and secretariat.

An important part of its mission is encouraging political engagement among women, both during and beyond election periods. Through shaping a permanently active women's movement, V&M ensures the sustained involvement of women in political life. The organisation is based on a firmly embedded local structure and operates in about two-thirds of all Flemish cities and towns. Through organising activities, issuing data on women's participation and launching information campaigns, it informs and makes the public aware of the importance of equal opportunity for men and women.

The role of the Christian Democratic women's organisation becomes increasingly important during election campaigns. Its representatives at the local level supervise the drawing up of electoral lists to make sure women get assigned to eligible positions. The national secretariat supports local departments in attracting female candidates.

V&M also raises awareness among the electorate for women's empowerment and encourages them to vote for female candidates. Two examples are the Vote Women campaigns aimed at increasing the visibility of female candidates and, most recently, the City on Stilettos campaign during the 2012 local elections that focused on gender-related topics to create safer, more social and more viable cities and towns. V&M offered campaigning material for street actions, but also for personal campaigns. It provided its candidates with an election video, an information brochure and a social media button. Through its contemporary approach, including modern and up-to-date campaigning material, V&M aimed to boost its image and attract a younger public.

The 2012 campaign proved to be successful. Of all the CD&V councillors elected, 38% were women, an increase of more than three percentage points in comparison with the local elections in 2006. Moreover, the Flemish Christian Democratic Party was able to present, both in absolute and relative numbers, the highest number of female aldermen.

Apart from promoting female candidates, V&M also seeks to attract female voters, by taking women-friendly positions and supporting policy recommendations that generally interest women. The Flemish Christian Democratic Party is traditionally popular among women. Research has shown that in 2009, 55% of the party's voters were women (Deschouwer et al. 2010). In 2010 this percentage rose to 60%.

Lessons learned

The introduction of quotas can be considered a crucial milestone, not only in Belgian politics but in all countries in which quotas have been enacted (whether voluntary or legally binding). The introduction of such measures implies the formal recognition of gender equality as a political goal and of the structural problems women face (Caluwaerts et al. 2012). As mentioned earlier, quotas increase democratic legitimacy and prevent the system from malfunctioning by making a greater diversity of voices heard, thereby promoting equality and justice.

We strongly believe quotas are a crucial measure to increase women's participation in politics. We agree with the European Union's Justice Commissioner Viviane Reding, who said, when proposing regulation on women on company boards, 'I don't like quotas, but I like what quotas do' (*The Economist* 2013). Quotas should not be regarded as a goal but as a means to achieve what we consider a democratic necessity: gender parity in election campaigns and political office. If gender parity is left to what is termed a natural progressive evolution, we will restrict women from exerting political influence in the decades to come. Quota rules have proven an effective mechanism to speed things up.

Quotas by themselves, however, are insufficient. They must be integrated in an ambitious policy framework covering all political levels, and they are more effective when they include a mechanism for compliance and sanctioning. Female candidates should be placed in winnable positions on party lists, a feature achieved in Belgium by introducing a ranking order for the two top candidates on the election list. Finally, IPU data on 2012 elections underscore the importance of the type of electoral system used in women's election to parliament. Proportional representation not only remained the best system for enforcing quotas, but also delivered a much higher percentage of women members of parliament (25%) in 2012 than first-past-the-post (14%) or a mixture of the two systems (17.5%) (IPU 2013b).

Evidence from the Belgian case shows that political parties, within the boundaries of the given legal framework, still play a very important role in making sure quotas have an effect. The Flemish Christian Democratic Party, driven by its women's movement, has put a lot of effort into promoting female candidates and encouraging citizens to vote for them. Electoral results have proven that this strategy works: more women were elected on Christian Democratic Party lists than from other parties, and 50 to 60% of its voters are women.

Outlook

Current debates show that it is important that women are not only represented in numbers, but also in a qualitative manner. The presence of female politicians has surely had an impact on the setting of political agendas by giving higher priority to topics that particularly interest or touch women. Examples include laws on the prevention and elimination of domestic violence, measures to increase female participation in other areas of society (for instance in the governing boards of publicly owned and listed companies), and policies to allow women to combine work and family life. The next step will be to make sure that gender considerations are included in all policy areas, termed 'gender mainstreaming'. Belgium has committed itself to this strategy and the Flemish Christian Democratic Party will see to it that it is properly implemented. Only when the potential effects of policy measures on both men and women are taken into account and effectively tackled can genuine equality of opportunity be achieved.

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This article was published in European View (June 2013) 12: 113-119

The final publication is available at <http://rd.springer.com/>