

# Women in Politics in Western Europe

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## Introduction

Political representation for women in Western Europe has been a complex process of progress and resistance. For example, the parity movement in France was among the first in the world to succeed in securing a constitutional amendment requiring the equal representation of women in politics. However, France has still not achieved parity. Progress has never been even amongst the countries. While some women in Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (UK) were granted suffrage as early as the 1910s, women in France and Italy had to wait until the end of World War II and women in Switzerland until 1971.

Interestingly, today only Switzerland makes it into the top twenty countries in the world for women's representation in parliaments, while the Netherlands, placing the lowest in the region, is 41st globally. Recent changes in the electoral space coupled with economic and political crises of great magnitude are threatening some of the progress that women have made in the region. Research shows, however, that women continue to pursue the goal of equal representation in spite of resistance and backlash from other political actors and the general public.

In this chapter we address two broad questions: how many women are in parliament and what do they do once in office. We consider the presence of women in parliament to be an important, although not always sufficient, goal for improving the representation of women. The question of women in politics is thus crucial for assessing the quality of democracy. In addressing these themes, the article will also discuss several important changes to the political landscape for women: increased discussion of violence against women in politics, the attention given to minority women in politics, and the political crises that are affecting women's ability to participate.

## How Many Women?

As of 2020, there are 1,099 women currently serving in national-level parliaments in Western European countries.<sup>1</sup> The regional average is 36.3% women in office, with the largest increases coming from France, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Since 2014, the regional average has only increased by roughly 5 percentage points. Other regions, particularly Africa and South America, have overtaken Western European countries, and now only one Western European country makes the top twenty. As mentioned in the introduction, all countries in Western Europe are in the top 50. The regional average of 36.3% is still well above the global average of women's representation, which is only 25%.

The fall in the global rankings then, speaks to stagnation and reversal of progress in some countries (i.e., Germany, Austria, Italy, and the Netherlands). For example, after the 2017 elections in Germany, the country was at its lowest level of women's representation since 1998.

The mixed changes in women's representation are a multifaceted and complex issue. Two variables must be examined: the electoral competition of political parties, and the continued difficulties of implementing 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.<sup>2</sup> Scholars categorise gender quotas into three types: legal candidate quotas, voluntary party quotas, and reserved seats.<sup>3</sup> 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 percentage 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.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=5&year=2020>.

<sup>2</sup> See Mona Lena Krook, *Quotas for Women in Politics: Gender and Candidate Selection Reform Worldwide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.quotaproject.org/aboutQuotas.cfm>.

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 that a quota exists is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for a gender-balanced parliament, as research on Western Europe and elsewhere has demonstrated.<sup>4</sup> For legal candidate quotas, both the mandated percentage of representation and the penalty for non-compliance are key to determining the resultant percentage of women represented in the elected body.<sup>5</sup>

In the case of France, where 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 chances of actually winning are often low. This helps to explain the changing 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, but after the major party changes in 2016, nearly 40% of their representatives are women. French parties must pay fines if they violate the quota law and the new centre party, *La République En Marche!*, successfully positioned itself as the party of gender equality by intentionally respecting the quota law and placing women in winnable seats.<sup>6</sup>

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) utilising 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” policy doubled the number of women in the House of Commons in the 1997 election. The All-Women Shortlist 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

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<sup>4</sup> Emelie Lilliefeldt, *Political Parties and Gender Balanced Parliamentary Presence in Western Europe: A two-step Fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis* (Sussex European Institute, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.representwomen.org/progress\\_towards\\_gender\\_parity\\_in\\_french\\_legislative\\_election](https://www.representwomen.org/progress_towards_gender_parity_in_french_legislative_election).

important in increasing the number of women candidates, 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 its 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 in principle are conducive to increasing the levels of women's representation, have little effect on the gender balance in parliaments 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, utilises 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. The highest-ranking country in the region, Switzerland, has a mixed electoral system which uses both PR and single-member districts. It is possible that these blended systems, combined with the presence of gender quotas and other equality measures, may provide the incentives and flexibility that encourage parties to name large numbers of women as candidates.

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.<sup>7</sup> In the case of Western Europe, 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 for understanding the complex dynamics

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<sup>7</sup> Jennifer L. Lawless and Richard L. Fox, *Girls Just Wanna Not Run: The Gender Gap in Young Americans' Political Ambition* (Washington, DC, 2013).

both in society and within politics that are entailed in the level of women's representation in politics.<sup>8</sup> It is clear though, that a pool of qualified and educated women in society is a necessary – though not sufficient – condition for the presence 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.

One way to see greater proportions of women in politics is to improve representation for minority women. While not all countries consider the racial and ethnic make-up of politics to be important, many are beginning to report on the levels of racial and ethnic diversity in public offices. Publicly funded research projects, such as the Pathways to Politics project,<sup>9</sup> are also beginning to investigate the activities of citizens of immigrant background in politics.

Minority women experience both sexism and racism and often face extreme levels of backlash and violence in response to their public presence. This compounding of marginalised identities and subsequent increased risk and/or discrimination is described as a “double jeopardy”.<sup>10</sup> Its counterpart, “multiple advantage” or “comparative advantage”,<sup>11</sup> describes the benefits that minority women experience as a result of their intersecting identities. In some cases, minority women are present at higher levels than majority women or minority men because they are able to represent multiple politicised identity categories at once. Parties can strategically choose minority women to fulfil their commitments to women's representation *and* minority representation.

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<sup>8</sup> Mercedes Mateo Diaz, *Representing Women: Female Legislators in Western Europe* (ECPR Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Fernandes, Jorge, Laura Morales, and Thomas Saalfeld. 2018. “Pathways to Power: The Political Representation of Citizens of Immigrant Origin in Eight European Democracies.” Policy Briefing/Report.

<sup>10</sup> King, Deborah K. “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology.” *Signs* 14, no. 1 (1988): 42–72. Accessed May 29, 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/3174661](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174661).

<sup>11</sup> Celis, Karen, and Silvia Erzeel. 2017. “The Complementarity Advantage: Parties, Representativeness and Newcomers' Access to Power.” *Parliamentary Affairs* 70 (1): 43–61. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsv043>.

The numbers of minority women in politics seem to vary by country due to the presence of gender quotas and the motivations of the political parties which selectively recruit potential candidates. In Germany, visible minorities are targeted for candidate selection only when it benefits the party, based on the calculations of party elites.<sup>12</sup> Research from France, the UK, and the Netherlands suggests that minority women are only admitted to politics if they play the role of token representation, or serve some other symbolic purpose of the party.<sup>13</sup> In France, for example, Murray argues that minority women are included as long as they further the project of secularism. Researchers in the UK refer to this practice as “acceptably different”.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, many researchers are flipping the question to ask “what keeps women *out* of office”. The most common answer is the overrepresentation of men. Another possible answer is the deterrent in the form of violence against women in politics (VAWIP). Krook and Sanin (2019) state that “violence against women in politics originates in structural violence, is perpetrated through cultural violence, and results in symbolic violence against women”. VAWIP includes the use, or threat of, force and can take five forms – physical, psychological, sexual, economic, and semiotic, and scholars argue that the purpose of VAWIP is the exclusion or expulsion of women from politics.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Jenichen, Anne. 2020. “Visible Minority Women in German Politics: Between Discrimination and Targeted Recruitment.” *German Politics*, April, 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2020.1748601>.

<sup>13</sup> Mügge, Liza M., Daphne J. van der Pas, and Marc van de Wardt. 2019. “Representing Their Own? Ethnic Minority Women in the Dutch Parliament.” *West European Politics* 42 (4): 705-27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2019.1573036>; Murray, Rainbow. 2016. “The Political Representation of Ethnic Minority Women in France.” *Parliamentary Affairs* 69 (3): 586-602. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsv064>.

<sup>14</sup> Durose, C., L. Richardson, R. Combs, C. Eason, and F. Gains. 2013. “‘Acceptable Difference’: Diversity, Representation and Pathways to UK Politics.” *Parliamentary Affairs* 66 (2): 246-67. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gss085>.

<sup>15</sup> Krook, Mona Lena, and Juliana Restrepo Sanín. 2019. “The Cost of Doing Politics? Analyzing Violence and Harassment against Female Politicians.” *Perspectives on Politics*, July, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592719001397>.

## What are the Women Doing?

A look at women in politics in Western 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 choose 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 healthcare.<sup>16</sup> As Catalano notes, women voters prioritise 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 given to issues that may not 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.”<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, 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.<sup>18</sup> 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

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<sup>16</sup> 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.

<sup>17</sup> Kimberly Cowell-Meyers, “Gender, Power, and Peace: A Preliminary Look at Women in the Northern Ireland Assembly,” *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*, 2001, 72.

<sup>18</sup> 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.

to raise some issues; one MP 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."<sup>19</sup> 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."<sup>20</sup> 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. A secondary effect of the increased advocacy has been the pursuit of these issues by men in parliaments as well. Research shows that "unlikely advocates" – men from all parties and women from centre or right parties – are taking up women's issues at increasing rates. Thus, the presence of women has a spillover effect when it comes to increasing representation for women.

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.<sup>21</sup> More recent research in the Netherlands also suggests that political party control of parliamentary committee assignments may also influence women's actions once they are in office – minority women are significantly more likely than minority men to be placed on committees that handle migration

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<sup>19</sup> Sarah Childs, "Attitudinally Feminist? The New Labour Women MPs and the Substantive Representation of Women," *Politics* 21, no. 3 (September 2001): 181.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>21</sup> 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.



concerns.<sup>22</sup> A similar pattern has been found in the committee placements of women in Italy – analysis of data from 1990-2013 shows that women are significantly more likely than men to be placed on “feminine” committees.<sup>23</sup>

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 women,<sup>24</sup> they also asked questions on a range of other topics. Furthermore, 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.

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 discussions in favour of the women’s issues for which they advocate.<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> Here it was key actors who consistently pushed on the issue, 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

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<sup>22</sup> Mügge, Liza M., Daphne J. van der Pas, and Marc van de Wardt. 2019. “Representing Their Own? Ethnic Minority Women in the Dutch Parliament.” *West European Politics* 42 (4): 705-27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2019.1573036>.

<sup>23</sup> Pansardi, Pamela, and Michelangelo Vercesi. 2017. “Party Gate-Keeping and Women’s Appointment to Parliamentary Committees: Evidence from the Italian Case.” *Parliamentary Affairs* 70 (1): 62-83. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsv066>.

<sup>24</sup> Karen Bird, “Gendering Parliamentary Questions,” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 7 (2005): 353-370.

<sup>25</sup> 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.

<sup>26</sup> 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.

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.<sup>27</sup>

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 the UK, Theresa May served as Prime Minister from 2016-2019, and Switzerland has continued its impressive gains from 2010. Today, women are in leadership roles in 26 Swiss cantons.<sup>28</sup> 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 debates and policy outcomes is a complex one. Both sympathetic actors and a conducive political context are required. In the wake of dramatic political crises such as the ongoing EU migrant crisis, Brexit, and the rise of far-right nationalist parties, researchers should explore the ways that major changes to political landscapes can impact women’s ability to gain office and represent themselves.

Despite these challenges, Western Europe, though, has many reasons to be hopeful. Proportional representation, the electoral system that

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<sup>27</sup> Katherine A. R. Opello, “Do Women Represent Women in France? The Case of Brittany’s Regional Council,” *French Politics* 6 (December 2008): 321-341.

<sup>28</sup> [https://www.representwomen.org/switzerland\\_s\\_strategies\\_for\\_political\\_parity\\_paid\\_off\\_in\\_2019](https://www.representwomen.org/switzerland_s_strategies_for_political_parity_paid_off_in_2019).

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 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.

	1997		2014		2020	
	% Women in Parliament	Global Rank	% Women in Parliament	Global Rank	% Women in Parliament	Global Rank
<b>Germany</b>	26.2	8	36.5	21	31.2	26
<b>France</b>	10.9	41	26.2	47	39.5	26
<b>Netherlands</b>	31.3	5	38.7	16	33.3	41
<b>Austria</b>	26.2	8	32.2	27	39.3	28
<b>Switzerland</b>	21.0	15	31	33	41.5	16
<b>Italy</b>	11.1	49	31.4	30	35.7	35
<b>United Kingdom</b>	18.2	19	22.6	61	33.9	40
<b>Regional Average</b>	20.7	-	31.2	-	36.3	-

*Table 1: November 1997, November 2014 and May 2020 respectively. Compiled from IPU 'Women In Parliaments' Archives and IPU Parline Data.*