

# Women's Descriptive and Substantive Representation in Nordic Politics

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In the international perspective, the five Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden – are often pointed to as models of gender equality, and they have frequently been placed at the top of world ranking lists pertaining to women's political representation. Today there is an average representation of 42.5 percent women in the national parliaments of the five countries, ranging from 38.1 percent in Iceland to 47.0 percent in Finland, compared to an international average of 25.1 percent women parliamentarians. The specificity of the Nordic countries in terms of women in politics can also be noted on the website of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, where regional statistics on women in parliamentary politics is provided with and without the Nordic countries.<sup>1</sup> Although the pursuit of gender balance in decision-making has been established as a cornerstone of the Nordic concept of democracy and gender equality policy for a long time, it is not so commonly known that it has taken quite some time to achieve high levels of women's representation. In fact, it has taken 70 to 80 years after the enfranchisement for women to reach the representation level of 30 to 40 percent of parliamentary seats. The proportion of women has increased by 2 or 3 percentage units per election, with only a few historical jumps. Scholars have described the development as a step-by-step process and the Nordic discourse on gender equality

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<sup>1</sup> [www.ipu.org](http://www.ipu.org).

as an incrementalist discourse of empowerment.<sup>2</sup> Considering the time it has taken for gender balance to be achieved and the many challenges that remain, scholars have even rejected the idea that the Nordic countries constitute a model for gender equality, at least not the only model.<sup>3</sup>

Departing from theories on descriptive and substantive representation, this chapter will analyse women's political representation in the Nordic countries. The chapter will give an overview of female leadership in the region and address the opportunities and gaps. It will also discuss how to make women's participation effective enough to influence the governance agenda and make it responsible to women's interests, needs and concerns.

## Theories on Gender and Political Representation

Departing from Hanna Pitkin's<sup>4</sup> seminal work, scholars have made a distinction between descriptive, substantive, and symbolic representation. *Descriptive representation*, or numerical representation, concerns the composition of elected bodies. It normally refers to the number of women elected and the ways in which the proportion of women can increase. It is usually argued that political decision-making bodies should reflect the composition of the population. *Substantive representation* focuses on the activities of women in parliaments and the ways in which elected women may change political procedures, political agendas and public policies to make them more women-friendly. *Symbolic representation*, finally, con-

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<sup>2</sup> D. Dahlerup and L. Freidenvall. 2005. "Quotas as a 'Fast Track' to Equal Political Representation for Women. Why Scandinavia is No Longer the Model." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 7 (1): 26-48; L. Freidenvall, D. Dahlerup and H. Skjeie. 2006. "The Nordic Countries: An Incremental Model." In Drude Dahlerup, ed. *Gender, Quotas and Politics*. New York/London: Routledge, 55-62; L. Freidenvall. 2013. "Step by Step: Women's Inroads to Parliamentary Power in Sweden." In: D. Dahlerup and M. Leyenaar, eds. *Breaking Male Democracy in Older Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 97-123; D. Dahlerup and M. Leyenaar, eds. 2013. *Breaking Male Democracy in Older Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> D. Dahlerup and L. Freidenvall. 2005. "Quotas as a 'Fast Track' to Equal Political Representation for Women. Why Scandinavia is No Longer the Model." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 7 (1): 26-48.

<sup>4</sup> H. Pitkin. 1967. *The Concept of Representation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

cerns the perception of women as political leaders and the importance of gender-balanced decision-making bodies.

The first topic (descriptive representation), including the vast research on gender quotas, has received by far the most attention in comparative work.<sup>5</sup> The second topic (substantive representation) includes research on attitudes and priorities<sup>6</sup> and introduction of bills.<sup>7</sup> Research within this field has also discussed whether a critical mass of women is needed in order for legislative changes to occur.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, research on the third topic (symbolic representation) is much less common, as it is often the least concrete outcome to investigate, creating difficulties with operationalisation, measurement and effects. One approach examines how women's presence affects the perceived legitimacy of elected bodies.<sup>9</sup> Another approach focuses on what functions symbolic representation fulfils in the construction of gender, in terms of what social roles get legitimised in policy discourse, and how this affects power constellations, ultimately revealing much about the relation between symbolic, descriptive, and substantive representation.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> A. Phillips. 1995. *The Politics of Presence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; J. Mansbridge. 1999. "Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent 'Yes.'" *Journal of Politics* 61 (3): 628-657; I. M. Young. 2000. *Inclusion and Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; D. Dahlerup. 2006. *Women, Quotas and Politics*. New York: Routledge; M. L. Krook. 2009. *Quotas for Women in Politics: Gender and Candidate Selection Reform Worldwide*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>6</sup> L. A. Schwindt-Bayer and W. Mishler. 2005. "An Integrated Model of Women's Representation". *The Journal of Politics* 67 (2): 407-28.

<sup>7</sup> S. Franceschet and J. Piscopo. 2008. "Gender Quotas and Women's Substantive Representation: Lessons from Argentina." *Politics & Gender* 4 (3): 393-425.

<sup>8</sup> K. Celis. 2006. "Substantive representation of women: The representation of women's interests and the impact of descriptive representation in the Belgian parliament (1900-1979)." *Journal of Women Political Policy* 28 (2): 85-114; K. Celis, S. Childs, J. Kantola and M. L. Krook. 2008. "Rethinking Women's Substantive Representation." *Representation* 44 (2): 99-110; S. Dovi. 2002. "Preferable Descriptive Representatives: Will Just Any Woman, Black, or Latino Do?" *American Political Science Review* 96 (4): 729-743.

<sup>9</sup> S. Childs. 2004. *New Labour Women's MPs: Women Representing Women*. London and New York: Routledge; L. A. Schwindt-Bayer and W. Mishler. 2005. "An Integrated Model of Women's Representation". *The Journal of Politics* 67 (2): 407-28.

<sup>10</sup> E. Lombardo and P. Meier. 2014. *The Symbolic Representation of Gender. A Discursive Approach*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

## Women's Descriptive Representation in the Nordic Countries

The Nordic countries share a number of characteristics, including democratic stability, secularism, a large public sector and an extended welfare state, as well as high standards of living and a long tradition for popular participation in politics.<sup>11</sup> The Proportional Representation-list (PR-list) electoral system, the dominance of the Social Democratic Party, and the long and continuous activities of the women's movement are additional common traits. In the Nordic countries, the breakthrough for women's participation in politics emerged in the 1970s and the proportion of women in politics has since then increased. Table 1 shows women's descriptive representation in Nordic politics in two periods, the mid-1990s and 2010–2019.

*Table 1. The descriptive representation of women in a number of key political positions in the Nordic countries in the mid-1990s and 2010–2019. Percent.*

Positions	Denmark		Finland		Iceland		Norway		Sweden	
<b>Parliament and government</b>	1994	2019	1995	2019	1995	2017	1993	2017	1994	2018
MPs	34	39.1	34	47.0	25	38.1	39	42.1	40	46.1
Ministers	35	35	41	63	10	45	42	40	50	50
Female Prime Minister		Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes		No
<b>Municipalities</b>	1997	2017	1996	2019	1994	2018	1995	2017	1994	2018
Municipal assemblies	27	33	31	39	25	47	33	39	41	43

*Sources: K. Niskanen and A. Nyberg, eds. 2009. Kön och makt i Norden. Del 1. Nordiska ministerrådet: Tema Nord; own calculations.*

The table shows that the proportion of women at various key political positions in the Nordic countries is quite good. Based on the 40-60 principle, that a proportion of 40-60 percent of each sex constitutes an equal or balanced representation, gender balance in parliament has been achieved in Finland, Norway and Sweden. In Denmark and Iceland, the representation of women is just below 40 percent. Compared to 25 years ago, in the

<sup>11</sup> L. Freidenvall, D. Dahlerup and H. Skjeie. 2006. "The Nordic Countries: An Incremental Model." In Drude Dahlerup, ed. *Gender, Quotas and Politics*. New York/London: Routledge.

mid-1990s, the representation of women has increased in all countries. Over the years, however, the number of women members of parliament (MPs) has fluctuated, most recently in Iceland where it decreased at the last parliamentary election (2017).

The current governments of the Nordic countries, except for Denmark, are also gender-balanced. The governments of Iceland, Norway and Sweden are gender-balanced, with 40-60 percent of ministers being women. In Denmark the ratio is around 35 percent. In Iceland, the proportion of women ministers has increased quite extensively, from 10 to 45 percent in 25 years, and in Finland, it has increased from 41 to 63, hence being female dominated. Notably, all Nordic countries, except for Sweden, have female leaders at the very top – as prime ministers.

The representation of women in local political assemblies is lower than in national parliaments, on the average, 40.2 percent in local bodies compared to 42.4 percent in national assemblies. However, in all of the Nordic countries the proportion of women councillors has increased, and the biggest increase can be noted in Iceland where the proportion has increased from 25 to 47 percent in the last 25 years.

## Special Measures, Including Party Quotas

In many countries across the world electoral gender quotas have been adopted to increase the number of women in politics.<sup>12</sup> In the Nordic countries, no legal electoral gender quotas have been adopted.<sup>13</sup> As noted by Lépinard and Rubio-Marín,<sup>14</sup> gender quotas in general have been only weakly endorsed in the Nordic countries. Regional variations exist, however; where Sweden and Denmark have resisted all forms of legislated quotas, Finland has introduced quotas for local politics, and Iceland and Norway have adopted quotas for corporate boards.

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<sup>12</sup> D. Dahlerup 2006. *Women, Quotas and Politics*. New York: Routledge; M. L. Krook 2009. *Quotas for Women in Politics: Gender and Candidate Selection Reform Worldwide*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>13</sup> L. Freidenvall, D. Dahlerup and H. Skjeie. 2006. "The Nordic Countries: An Incremental Model." In Drude Dahlerup, ed. *Gender, Quotas and Politics*. New York/London: Routledge, 55-82.

<sup>14</sup> E. Lépinard and R. Rubio-Marín, eds. 2018. *Transforming Gender Citizenship. The Irresistible Rise of Gender Quotas in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Internal party quotas and candidate quotas were adopted by centre and left-wing parties in Denmark and Norway in the 1970s, in Sweden in the 1980s, and in Iceland in the 1990s. In Denmark, quotas were adopted by two political parties in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but they were also abolished a few years later on the grounds that they were no longer considered necessary.<sup>15</sup> As noted by Agustín, Siim and Borchorst,<sup>16</sup> there has been consensus in Denmark on using the voluntary approach to achieve gender equality in politics; in fact, Denmark prides itself on refusing gender quotas. In Finland, no party has adopted electoral quotas, due to the electoral system in which preferential voting plays a key role. However, a majority of the parties represented in parliament have adopted internal quotas and the remaining parties promote gender balance.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the Finnish Gender Equality Act of 1995 stipulates that each sex shall have at least 40 percent representation on the municipal executive board. In Iceland, the Left Party adopted a 40 percent quota in the 1980s. One may also define the Women's Party as possessing a radical quota system, because only women candidates were eligible on the party's list in 1983–1999. In Norway and Sweden, party quotas have been adopted by many parties, including the large Social Democratic Parties. In 1993, the Social Democratic Party in Sweden adopted the zipper system, in which men and women are altered on party lists. A few years earlier, similar policies were adopted by the Green Party and the Left Party, while parties to the centre/right adopted recommended targets and general goals.<sup>18</sup> In 1986, the Social Democratic prime minister in Norway, Gro Harlem Brundtland, made gender balance a regulative norm also for cabinet appointments, forming

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<sup>15</sup> L. Freidenvall, D. Dahlerup and H. Skjeie. 2006. "The Nordic Countries: An Incremental Model." In Drude Dahlerup, ed. *Gender, Quotas and Politics*. New York/London: Routledge, 64.

<sup>16</sup> L. Agustín, B. Siim and A. Borchorst. 2018. "Gender Equality Without Gender Quotas: Dilemmas in the Danish Approach to Gender Equality and Citizenship." In: E. Lépinard and R. Rubio-Marín, eds. *Transforming Gender Citizenship. The Irresistible Rise of Gender Quotas in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 400–423.

<sup>17</sup> L. Hart, A.-M. Holli and A. Kovalainen. 2009. "Gender and Power in Politics and Business in Finland". In: K. Niskanen and A. Nyberg, eds. *Kön och makt i Norden. Del 1*. Nordiska ministerrådet: Tema Nord, 569.

<sup>18</sup> L. Freidenvall. 2018. "Gender Equality without Legislated Quotas in Sweden." In: E. Lépinard and R. Rubio-Marín. *Transforming Gender Citizenship. The Irresistible Rise of Gender Quotas in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 366–399.

the world's first gender-balanced cabinet. Quotas have today become an institutional norm in Norway; this is true also in other areas of public life, including the corporate sector. According to Mari Teigen,<sup>19</sup> the adoption of corporate quotas was a "natural" prolongation of the institutionalisation of the gender equality policy in Norway, which started with the introduction of voluntary party quotas in the 1970s as well as the regulation of the gender composition in public commissions.

It is important to keep in mind, though, that party quotas were adopted during a period of time in which the parliamentary representation of women was already relatively high, between 20 and 30 percent. The quotas adopted in the Nordic countries have therefore been labelled "high echelon quotas", being promoted by a strong female minority in parties that took advantage of their position of power to achieve a better gender distribution in party politics.<sup>20</sup> These high echelon quotas were introduced to ensure that women's presence did not decrease. Hence, they operate as a lower threshold rather than as ambitions to increase the level.<sup>21</sup>

A key effect of the adoption of special measures, such as party quotas, may be found at the discursive level: women's movements' pressure on political parties to improve the gender balance as well as the competition between parties for votes have forced the entire political spectrum to react and take an active position on representational issues.<sup>22</sup>

## Women's Substantive Representation

To what extent do women MPs prioritise gender equality issues? In what ways do they promote women-friendly policies? Previous research has

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<sup>19</sup> M. Teigen. 2018. "The Natural Prolongation of The Norwegian Gender Equality Policy Institution." In: E. Lépinard and R. Rubio-Marín. *Transforming Gender Citizenship. The Irresistible Rise of Gender Quotas in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 341-365.

<sup>20</sup> L. Freidenvall, D. Dahlerup and H. Skjeie. 2006. "The Nordic Countries: An Incremental Model." In Drude Dahlerup, ed. *Gender, Quotas and Politics*. New York/London: Routledge, 55-82.

<sup>21</sup> Dahlerup and Freidenvall. 2005. "Quotas as a 'Fast Track' to Equal Political Representation for Women. Why Scandinavia is No Longer the Model." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 7 (1): 26-48.

<sup>22</sup> L. Freidenvall, D. Dahlerup and H. Skjeie. 2006. "The Nordic Countries: An Incremental Model." In Drude Dahlerup, ed. *Gender, Quotas and Politics*. New York/London: Routledge, 55-82.

shown that men and women MPs espouse distinct policy priorities<sup>23</sup> and that women MPs share many of the same opinions as female voters.<sup>24</sup> Research has also shown that women MPs tend to differ from men MPs in terms of setting the legislative agenda and proposing new policies that deal with issues of concern to women.<sup>25</sup> Party affiliation matters, of course. For instance, left-leaning parties have traditionally been more prone to pursue gender equality issues,<sup>26</sup> although conservative women MPs have also championed gender equality.<sup>27</sup>

While there is agreement that gender has an impact, scholars disagree on the degree of the impact.<sup>28</sup> Scholars have also noted that a simple increase in the numbers of women elected – a “critical mass” – does not necessarily result in policy gains for women, because of various constraints such as party affiliation and institutional norms.<sup>29</sup> Political scientist Hege Skjeie,<sup>30</sup> for instance, has shown that female MPs in Norway prioritise issues related to “care and career policies” (to be able to combine working life with family responsibilities) to a greater extent than male MPs. More recent research from Sweden finds that women MPs experience greater pressure and higher levels of anxiety and are subject to more negative

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<sup>23</sup> M. L. Swers. 1998. “Are Women More Likely to Vote for Women’s Issue Bills Than Their Male Colleagues?” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 23 (1): 67-91; L. A. Schwindt-Bayer and W. Mishler. 2005. “An Integrated Model of Women’s Representation”. *The Journal of Politics* 67 (2): 407-28.

<sup>24</sup> M. M. Diaz. 2005. *Representing Women’s Female Legislators in West European Parliaments*. Colchester, UK: ECPR Press.

<sup>25</sup> K. A. Bratton and L. P. Ray. 2002. “Descriptive Representation, Policy Outcomes, and Municipal Day-Care Coverage in Norway.” *American Journal of Political Science* 46 (2): 428-37.

<sup>26</sup> M. Caul. 1999. “Women’s Representation in Parliament: The Role of Political Parties.” *Party Politics* 5 (1): 79-98.

<sup>27</sup> P. Webb and S. Childs. 2012. “Gender Politics and Conservatism: The View from the British Conservative Party Grassroots.” *Government and Opposition* 47 (1): 21-48.

<sup>28</sup> J. Lovenduski and P. Norris. 2003. “Westminster women: The politics of presence.” *Political Studies* 51 (1): 84-102; L. Wängnerud. 2011. “Politics of Presence or Feminist Awareness? Two Perspectives on Gender Dynamics in Politics” In: L. Freidenvall and J. Rönnebeck, eds. *Bortom Röststråten: Kön, politik och medborgarskap i Norden*. Huddinge: Södertörns högskola, 141.

<sup>29</sup> K. Celis, S. Childs, J. Kantola and M. L. Krook. 2008. “Rethinking Women’s Substantive Representation.” *Representation* 44 (2): 99-110.

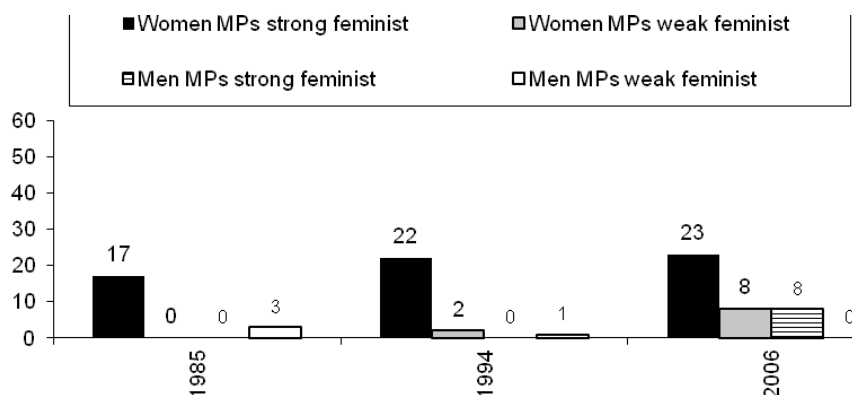
<sup>30</sup> H. Skjeie. 1992. *Den politiske betydningen av kjønn. En studie av norsk topp-politikk*. Oslo: Institutt for samfunnsforskning, rapport 92: 11.



treatment than male MPs.<sup>31</sup> Hence equal descriptive representation does not necessarily result in equal substantive representation.

Political scientist Lena Wängnerud<sup>32</sup> has analysed the extent to which Swedish parliamentarians promote issues of gender equality in political work. Figure 1 shows the response to the question: "Which political issues/area are you personally most interested in?"

Figure 1. Gender Equality as an issue in the work of Swedish MPs. Percent.



Comments: The figure shows the response to an open question that reads: "Which political issues/areas are you personally most interested in?" Up to three issues could be mentioned. The responses were coded according to a detailed code scheme. The members of parliament whose answers included gender equality, women's issues, sex discrimination, affirmative action etc. were entered into the "gender equality policy" category. "Strong feminist" refers to members of parliament who consider the duty to promote the interests/views of women as "very important", while "weak feminist" refers to those who consider this duty as "fairly important", "not very important", or "not at all important" (categories are merged). The number of respondents: 1985: women MPs strong feminist 54, women MPs weak feminist 44, men MPs strong feminist 19, men MPs weak feminist 190; 1994: women MPs strong feminist 68, women MPs weak feminist 51, men MPs strong feminist 10, men MPs weak feminist 169; 2006: women MPs strong feminist 62, women MPs weak feminist 66, men MPs strong feminist 25, men MPs weak feminist 121.

<sup>31</sup> J. Erikson and C. Josefsson. 2019. "The Legislature as a Gendered Workplace: Exploring Members of Parliament's Experiences of Working in the Swedish Parliament." *International Political Science Review* 40 (2): 197-214.

<sup>32</sup> L. Wängnerud. 2011. "Politics of Presence or Feminist Awareness? Two Perspectives on Gender Dynamics in Politics." In: L. Freidenvall and J. Rönnbäck, eds. *Bortom Rösträtten: Kön, politik och medborgarskap i Norden*. Huddinge: Södertörns högskola, 141.

Source: L. Wängnerud. 2011. "Politics of Presence or Feminist Awareness? Two Perspectives on Gender Dynamics in Politics" In: L. Freidenvall and J. Rönnbäck, eds. *Bortom Rösträtten: Kön, politik och medborgarskap i Norden*. Huddinge: Södertörns högskola, 141.

As the figure shows, it is primarily women MPs categorised as strong feminists who promote gender equality policies in their political work. In 1985 and 1994, 17 and 22 percent, respectively, prioritised gender equality policies. In 2006, women MPs categorised as strong feminists remain the ones that promote gender equality issues the most (23 percent). However, men MPs categorised as strong feminists now also score fairly well, eight percent, which corresponds to the figure among women MPs categorised as weak feminists.<sup>33</sup> Thus, feminist actors also matter. As scholars have pointed out, it appears crucial to have "critical actors", parliamentarians who initiate policy proposals or encourage others to take steps to promote gender-sensitive policies.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, in some contexts, men may play a key role in promoting women's policy concerns.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

The Nordic countries have for many years been at the top of the league pertaining to women's political representation. Today, they are moving down on the global ranking list, as their leading position is challenged by other regions. This development can most likely be explained by the reluctance to use electoral gender quotas. It is also notable that it seems like the linear development in the Nordic countries in terms of descriptive representation has come to a halt. The 40 percent threshold seems to be a magic line that is difficult to pass, and in some countries, most recently in Iceland, the proportion of women MPs has even decreased. These trends should function as a wake-up call for the Nordic countries, making them

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> S. Childs and M. L. Krook. 2006. "Should Feminists Give Up on Critical Mass? A Contingent Yes." *Politics & Gender* 2 (4): 522-530.

<sup>35</sup> K. Celis. 2006. "Substantive representation of women: The representation of women's interests and the impact of descriptive representation in the Belgian parliament (1900-1979)." *Journal of Women Political Policy* 28 (2): 85-114.

pay attention to the fact that gender equality will not manifest automatically, neither in terms of descriptive representation nor substantive representation. Without political will or political pressure positive change is unlikely to occur.