Comparative Perspectives Symposium: Challenges to Women's Leadership

Challenges to Women's Political Representation in Europe

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Have women finally succeeded in persuading the long-term tenants of power—men—to start sharing the precious commodity of political leadership with them? In the twenty-seven European Union (EU) member states, there are two women presidents in office (in Finland and Ireland) and one woman prime minister (in Germany). Three governments, however, have 40–50 percent women ministers (Finland, Sweden, and Spain), while eight governments have more than 30 percent women ministers (including Denmark, Germany, France, Austria, and the United Kingdom), and the overall percentage of women in the European Parliament is 30 percent. The numerical presence of women in legislative assemblies and in governments has never been this high. Does this mean that equal gender representation in politics is forthcoming and just a matter of time? To answer this question I explore various factors that could affect women's leadership in European politics in the twenty-first century, contrasting potential dangers with more optimistic scenarios.

An upward trend?

For a long time it was believed that the underrepresentation of women in politics could be explained by women's lack of resources and by traditional prejudice against women performing public roles. Within this framework equal representation could eventually be achieved as a country developed. However, it became clear that increasing numbers of highly educated women, wealthy women, and women with professional experience in law or management did not fundamentally change the power relations between men and women (Leyenaar 2004). Women's lack of

political power appeared to stem from exclusion and discrimination, and therefore affirmative action and gender quotas were necessary in order to achieve equal representation. While the gradual integration of women in politics through an increase in resources could provide an "incremental track" to gender equality, gender quota legislation could provide a "fast track," producing substantial increases in the number of women entering parliament (Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2005). Europe has clearly hiked along both tracks, with the northern countries following the incremental route and countries like France and Belgium taking the fast track with their adoption of quota legislation in the 1990s.

More generally, the upward trend of women members of parliament (MPs) is due to secularization and to a growing culture of equality resulting in a more equal distribution of economic, social, and political resources between men and women. These days, the majority of women are gainfully employed, and women have caught up with men in education. Tax systems and pension schemes have been individualized and made independent from marital status. Moreover, we find a wider range of child-care facilities and parental benefits like tax deductions and family allowance and parental leave policies. And, pressured by their women's sections, political parties have adopted more equitable selection criteria and are now actively, with or without applying gender quotas, searching for women candidates (Portegijs, Hermans, and Lalta 2006). This progress, however, may be challenged over the next decade. Several emerging trends are of particular concern.

Dangers that lie in wait
The end of gender equality policies
In 2003 the Dutch minister of equal opportunities publicly declared that in the Netherlands gender equality had been achieved, since structural gender differences in education and in paid labor had nearly disappeared (*Trouw* 2003). Therefore, the government decided to discard policies aimed at the advancement of women as a group and to adopt a more individual approach. The elimination of specific women's advancement programs is also a consequence of the adaptation of the concept of gender mainstreaming—the integration of a gender perspective in all general policies—advocated throughout Europe (Council of Europe 1998).

This neoliberal thinking clearly poses a threat to future—and still very necessary—structural changes in gender relations in, for example, the sphere of work-life balance and in the distribution of political and economic power. Especially in those countries where women's social, eco-

nomic, and political advancement is clearly visible, the elimination of equal-opportunity policies as well as the related administrative structure within government for supporting these policies will result either in a standstill or even in a backlash. If less developed EU member states follow suit in adhering to this "end of equality" ideology and if the European Parliament also adopts this view, future binding agreements for the EU countries with regard to gender equality and gender representation will be out of the question.

The acceptable minimum

In most European countries, all-male political assemblies or governments with only one token woman lost their democratic legitimacy in the 1970s. The 1960s-era demands for more citizen participation combined with the demand by the women's movement for equal rights proved to be a strong catalyst in the fight for equal political representation. From that time on we find a steady increase in the number of women MPs acceptable to parties, from the obligatory one woman to a threshold of at least 30 percent. Drude Dahlerup has labeled this the "acceptable minimum" (2007). But the danger is that the percentage of women in parliament—30–35 percent—is now serving as a glass ceiling that keeps women well below the level of parity. Sharing political leadership positions means sharing power, the political commodity that is most highly prized. Men in power may find it far preferable to share only one-third of the seats rather than to part with half their power base. Consequently, the number of women in parliaments may stagnate because of this acceptable minimum.

The weakening women's movement

From the early twentieth-century struggles for suffrage to the demands for gender balance in the 1970s and 1980s, the constant pressure of the women's movement contributed to the current relatively high levels of women's political representation in eight EU member states (Lovenduski 2005). These days, however, the women's movement in most countries is relatively weak, both in terms of institutionalization and in terms of number of supporters. A so-called feminist backlash is noticeable in many parts of Europe. Many young, highly educated women in their twenties, who have experienced no gender discrimination in their education or in finding good jobs, do not see any problems for women as a group. They perceive feminism and devices such as affirmative action and quota setting to be degrading. When quota laws were being debated in Italy, for example, a group of women referred to the quota laws as "panda laws," as if they were a means to safeguard an endangered species (Guadagnini

1998, 99). It fits the neoliberal zeitgeist of the twenty-first century to say that women should no longer be viewed as victims, as people in need of special treatment. One result of this perspective is that individual women are now more difficult to mobilize on the issue of women's political leadership. Other major issues such as work-life balance and the impact of globalization on women receive more attention.

Only in those countries where women's representation in government is still less than 15 percent do we find large women's coalitions like the Women's Political Association in Ireland, Women for Parity in France, and the Political Association of Women in Greece lobbying continuously for equal representation. But in countries that have achieved 30-plus percent representation of women in elected offices, it is more difficult than it used to be to form large coalitions of women's organizations or women's sections of parties as well as to mobilize individual women to pressure political leaders during elections, government formation, or debates on constitutional changes.

The rise of populist and new right parties

The progress of women's political leadership may be hindered also because of the electoral success of populist parties throughout Europe. In the 1990s new populist parties came to the fore, such as the Freedom Party in Austria, Lega Nord in Italy, and the List Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands. These parties place a strong emphasis on the defense of their own countries' cultural values. Another characteristic is hostility toward the expansion of the public sector and the welfare state. Right-wing populist parties embrace liberal individualism and want to maximize the autonomy of the individual (Taggart 1995). The available research points to a gender gap in voting preferences, with men more likely than women to support the new right (Betz 1994; Gidengil et al. 2005). Explanations of this gender gap are that the greater dependency of women on the welfare state makes them reluctant to support parties that want to dismantle it, that women's greater loyalty to Christian Democracy is tied to their greater church attendance, and that men are more concerned with law and order (Kitschelt 1995; Gidengil et al. 2005). Neither the political values nor the gender composition of supporters makes it likely that these populist parties will promote women as their political leaders.

The reemergence of patriarchal values and the rise of religious fundamentalism

A common factor of the eight countries where women hold more than 30 percent of elected offices is a relatively high level of secularization:

religion has become less important for the majority of citizens in these countries. Religious practices are closely aligned with traditional ideologies, including strict notions of male and female roles in society that assign men roles in public and community affairs and women nurturing roles within the family. Consequently, in those countries where religion is still salient in people's lives (Malta, Ireland, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, and Poland), women have had more difficulty entering politics in substantial numbers than have women in countries where the effect of religion has waned over the years. The growth of religious fundamentalism, associated with the spread of evangelical Christianity or increased migration of people with Islamist views, may also contribute to a political climate in which political leaders reinforce social norms that subordinate women (Inglehart and Norris 2003).

Quality of life issues

A final possible threat to future attainment of balanced participation of men and women in politics comes from women themselves. Fewer women than before seem to be willing to adhere to the demands of leadership positions, in politics or in business. Some women politicians report that an important reason for their decisions to quit after one term in a representative office is the trade-off between time and results (Castenmiller et al. 2002). Politics is very time consuming, and the concrete results can be few and far between. On the basis of interviews with 1,647 male and female leaders in politics and business from twenty-seven different countries, Alison Woodward and Dawn Lyon concluded that women politicians work on average sixty-six hours per week, compared with thirty-six hours worked by other women in the same age group. Further, they note that "politicians of both genders have the highest occurrence of a 90+ hour week" (2000, 92–93). These superhuman weeks reflect the need for politicians to be on the job not only during conventional workday hours when civil servants are present but also during early mornings, evenings, and weekends. Spending so much time on the job necessarily leaves less time for other aspects of life.

The male-dominant culture may be another reason that women stay away from politics. Debates in the British House of Commons or in the German Bundestag make it perfectly understandable why many women (and men) decide not to become involved in party politics. It seems that women as a group do care about the policies and outcomes of decision making, but they care less about the office itself, and this attitude may result in a shortage of women candidates for political office.

Conclusion

Future developments in Europe are not set in stone. Although the foregoing trends could pose significant challenges to women's leadership, other factors could produce more optimistic possibilities. Indeed, the number of women political leaders may continue to grow in more European countries. With electoral turnout decreasing and membership in political parties declining in most European countries (Gallagher, Laver, and Mair 2006), political parties may turn to women to perk up their images. As women political leaders continue to be the exception rather than the rule, many people are concerned about the legitimacy, democratic character, transparency, and accountability of European politics. Party leaders may become increasingly aware that a more representative composition of their parliamentary party can contribute to greater legitimacy, heightening people's inclination to accept the political decisions made. More women in office may also make the party appear more responsive to particular constituencies, as women politicians incorporate gender issues into larger party platforms. Having more women leaders could also generate higher levels of support for political parties, as women recruit those in their expansive social networks into partisan political work. Should more parties begin to recognize the benefits associated with gender parity in governance, more European countries may opt for the fast track and introduce quota legislation guaranteeing 30–50 percent women in parliament. Greece, Germany, and Italy have already changed their constitutions to allow for electoral laws that include gender quotas for the number of candidates or representatives. Perhaps they will be the vanguard of a more gender-equitable trend.

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