

Political parties, women's organizations and gender quota

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Abstract

Across the world more and more states establish some form of gender quotas. Even in states that were reluctant to have any form of “preferential” treatment for women (such as were the Central and Eastern Europe countries) the combination between a favorable gender equality climate, women’s mobilization and political parties’ will has led to 15 states establishing quotas. Romania has only (inefficient) voluntary political parties’ quotas and one of the lowest levels of women elected worldwide. When quotas are needed who and why can be more successful in pushing for their establishment? This article’s thesis is that women’s organizations inside political parties can be successful in their mobilization to establish quotas because they can use both pragmatic and normative reasons

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when convincing political party leaders to pursue reforms internally (voluntary quotas) and externally (legal quotas).

In the first sections, the article presents current academic literature that points to the prominent role that political parties and women's formal organizations inside them play in the process of quota adoption. I adapt these arguments to the Romanian context, focusing on two dimensions underlined by the literature reviewed: 1. the pragmatic argument (or the strategic interests argument) and 2. the "side-effects" of quotas (the descriptive-substantive representation debate). The common nominator of the two arguments is that, when contextualized to Romania, women's organizations would be especially efficient in establishing quotas because they work from within the political system and can be viewed as an actor with legitimate claims to increased political representation.

The second part presents the results of quantitative research obtained from a sample group of members of the Social Liberal Union Women's Organizations² regarding their involvement in party activities and general political knowledge.

Introduction

Representation and inclusiveness are crucial components of modern democracy and their interdependence means that inclusiveness is measured by the way that political institutions manage to accommodate representation. As Lovenduski (2005, 1) points out "the representation of women in a political system is a good test of its claims to democracy". Inter-Parliamentary Union, the organization that measures women's political participation around the world since 1997, states that in 2012 women constituted

² The Union has ceased its existence since the article was written.

20,3% of members of all parliaments worldwide³. The figures for the European Union (EU) are slightly better for 2013, with women making up 25.6% of national parliaments (Freidenvall and Dahlerup, 2013). The numbers drop again (to 19.7%) when we analyze the new EU member states from Eastern Europe (idem), confirming the extensive research about the negative impact that the transition period following the fall of communist regimes of Central and Eastern Europe had on women's political representation. In Romania, in 2012, women represented 11,5% of the percent of the female representatives elected out of the total number of members of Parliament, a continuous but painfully slow increase from the 4,9 percent registered in 1990⁴.

The questions of who can enhance women's representation (followed by "how") have revolved in the past two decades around the issue of quotas. There are different types of quotas in use today around the world: reserved seats (common for new and transitional democracies, but not applied in Europe), voluntary political party quotas, and legislative quotas (established through constitutional and/ or electoral reform). Quotas (in their different forms) are currently established in over one hundred states worldwide. While they initially met resistance due to either liberal/ meritocratic arguments (Western Europe) or historic legacies (the case of Central and Eastern Europe countries)⁵, quotas are now the rule rather than the exception in Europe.

³ *Women in Parliament in 2012: the year in perspective*, 2013, www.ipu.org.

⁴ Evoluția femeilor în Parlamentul României (The Evolution of Women in the Romanian Parliament), 2013, available at: <http://www.roaep.ro/ro/section.php?id=27&l2=58>, accessed 04.04.2013.

⁵ As Dahlerup and Freidenvall (2010) argue, the reactions of political actors and citizens (positive and negative) to claims of establishing quotas are based on predictions about what quota can and will do once established.