

Explaining Cross-National Differences in Women's Descriptive Representation in the European Parliament: a Multivariate Regression Comparative Study

The European Parliament (EP) is often described as a champion of gender equality in Europe, both for its strong support for women's right and for the relatively balanced ratio of female and male Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). Taking into account the aggregated Member States' average, the percentage of women in the European Parliament since the first EP elections in 1979 has been consistently higher than the percentage of female parliamentarians in the national lower houses (*vide*: Fortin-Rittberger and Rittberger, 2014). Women currently make record-breaking 39.3% of MEPs and 32.7% of national MPs (EIGE, 2021-Q1). However, an unaggregated analysis unveils substantial variations across MSs: from perfectly gender balanced national representations in the EP from Denmark, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta and Slovenia to only 18.2% of women MEPs from Romania and none from Cyprus.

Literature shows that models of analysis and explanation of increasing women's political representation at national parliaments level do not travel well to the level of the EP (Stockemer, 2008) and that differing national electoral rules (including quotas, electoral formulas, district magnitudes, effective thresholds – all within the proportional representation system imposed by the EU for EP elections) have only minimal influence on the number of women MEPs elected in each MS, as opposed to tendencies observed in national parliaments (Farrell and Scully, 2005; Chiva, 2014; Fortin-Rittberger and Rittberger, 2014). On the other hand, factors such as parties' recruitment procedures and party positions on European integration have been suggested to potentially influence the gender balance of national delegations to the EP. The aforementioned researchers are nevertheless in agreement that cross-national differences have not been sufficiently explained and that further examination is required.

The following study aims to contribute to the existing body of literature explaining cross-national variation in women's representation in the EP by drawing on a new data from the European elections in May 2019 and examining several variables that have been deemed potentially significant in previous research. It seems vital to uncover factors behind considerable disparities between Member States regarding the proportion of women elected to the EP in order to effectively design gender equality policies at the European level. The subject has many dimensions, including theoretical, descriptive and normative. The research project is an academic inquiry, yet its findings can be important for policy makers (e.g. European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality) and policy entrepreneurs (e.g. European Women's Lobby).

The project will seek to uncover: (1) Why does a high cross-national variation in women's descriptive political representation occur in the European Parliament?; (2) What is the role of national political parties in electing women as MEPs? Do the political orientations of parties (left-right spectrum), their views on social and cultural values and their positions on European integration have any effect on the percentage of women elected from these parties to the European Parliament? Do internal party rules, structures and candidate selection procedures make difference in terms of gender balance of the party's representation in the EP?; (3) Does electoral rules and ballot structure have impact on the percentage of women MEP elected from Member States?

The theoretical framework will be based on feminist institutionalism and Feminist Comparative Policy (*vide*: Mazur and Hoard, 2014; Kantola and Lombardo, 2017). The project will employ the comparative method. The case selection will be guided by the Przeworski and Teune's (1970) Most Similar Systems Design. The principal technique will be multivariate regression analysis. Additionally, ANOVA and Pearson's Correlation Coefficient will be used. The main dependent variable will be the percentage of seats in the EP per Member State held by women MEPs. The independent variables include national political parties' ideological stances (left-right spectrum), parties' views on social and cultural values (postmaterialist-traditional), parties' position on European integration (favourable-sceptical) and national ballot structure (closed/open list/single transferable vote). Data will be drawn from Chapel Hill Expert Survey, European Institute for Gender Equality's Gender Statistics Database, and European Parliamentary Research Service.