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## **Formal Institutions and Women's Electoral Representation in Four European Countries: Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands<sup>1</sup>**

By Sophia Lu<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

This research attempted to produce evidence that formal institutions, such as electoral and internal party quotas, can advance women's active roles in the public sphere using the cases of four European countries: Belgium, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands. The quantitative dataset was provided by the University of Chicago and the Inter-University Consortium of Political and Social Research based on a two-year study (2008-2010) of political parties. Belgium engages in constitutionally mandated electoral quotas. Germany, Italy and the Netherlands, on the other hand, have internal party quotas, which are voluntarily adopted by political parties. In analyzing each country's chi-square and Pearson's *r* correlation, Belgium, having electoral quota, is the only country that was analyzed for electoral quotas. Germany, Italy and the Netherlands' internal voluntary party quotas were correlated with women's descriptive representations. Using chi-square analysis, this study showed that the presence of electoral quotas is correlated with an increase in the percentage of women in decision-making bodies as well as with an increase in the percentage of women in decision-making bodies. Likewise, using correlational analysis, a higher number of political parties employing internal party voluntary quotas is correlated with an increase in the percentage of women occupying seats in parliament as well as an increase in the percentage of women nominees in electoral lists of political parties. In conclusion, gender quotas, such as electoral quotas or internal party quotas, are an effective policy tool for greater women's representation in political bodies. Political parties and governments should opt to have gender quotas, whether electoral or internal party quotas, to address the underrepresentation of women in parliament, decision-making bodies, and policy-formulation.

*Key Words:* Women's Electoral Participation, Formal Institutions, Institutional Feminism, Internal Party Quota, Electoral Quota, Europe

### **Introduction**

Women occupy a unique position in both the household and in society, especially in the political sphere. Women's unique attributes and experiences place them in a disparate position compared to their male counterparts (Kia, 2000). The patriarchal perceptions that a woman's primary roles are childbearing, childrearing, and homework have been altered in some societies, albeit slowly, as the international community, including the United Nations (UN) and the European

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Union (EU) have taken initiatives to promote women's presence and involvement in the socio-political arena such as the gender-training program by the EU and the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (European Parliament, 2008; United Nations, 2014). Likewise, some countries, such as Belgium, France, Spain and Portugal have legalized electoral quotas for women in the parliament and other elective positions within the government (European Parliament, 2008). Thus, the movement towards greater women's involvement in the public sphere has begun and is growing in Europe.

The subject matter of this paper is to produce evidence that formal institutions, such as electoral and internal party quotas, can advance women's active roles in the public sphere. The European Union has set certain goals for the advancement of participation among women. These include creating a more conducive and innovative environment for encouraging women's involvement in policy-formulating and decision-making bodies (European Parliament, 2008). The significance of this research is to prove that institutions help achieve greater political equality among men and women in selected European countries.

The overall research question in this study is: "Do formal institutions, such as electoral quotas and internal party quotas, affect the level of women's electoral participation in Europe, particularly in Belgium, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands?" The specific research questions are: 1.) What are the factors that affect women's political participation in these countries? 2) What percentage of the parliament is composed of women? 3) Does the presence of electoral and internal party quotas affect the number of women in parliament? and 4) Does the presence of electoral and internal quotas affect the number of women in decision-making bodies?

The dataset analyzed in this study was provided by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) of the University of Chicago. It is based on a research conducted from 2008-2010 covering 329 political party lists in 26 countries. For this study, only four countries were included: Belgium, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands.

## **Theoretical and Conceptual Understanding of Women's Political Location in Europe**

### *Theoretical Framework: Feminist Institutionalism*

In the field of politics today, gender plays an important role in the realm of political change. Since gender equality has increasingly become a factor in the discourses on democracy and justice (include EU report in citation), a feminist institutional framework provides a heuristic tool in the analysis of the interaction of formal and informal rules with the politics of gender relations (Mackay et al., 2010). Institutions are concerned with legal processes and formal procedures with which these changes in gender relations are brought about or hampered. In other words, "institutions determine the rules of the political game" (Lake, 2006, p. 765). From the perspective of institutional feminism, institutions can either reinforce or eliminate unequal power relations between genders.

It is a rare discourse in institutional politics to cover gender as a crucial dimension in achieving a broader institutional goal for society's development. It is feminism that takes into consideration the dimension of gender in political processes. Feminism's clamor for gender equality is a response to the inability of institutional apparatuses to accommodate women into the public sphere. Nonetheless, it is necessary to look into institutions as gendered in order to understand the practices, ideals, goals and outcomes of politics. Economic, social and political realities of men and women are shaped and reshaped by institutions. The blueprint of institutions, which includes the electoral and the legal system, can determine the success or failure of women-

oriented policies. It is in this institutional path that the debate on feminist issues regarding inclusion, or in the case of this study, positive discrimination, can be tackled and approached systematically.

Democracy, in a broader sense, concerns itself with the concepts of equality and justice. Constitutional reform for the advancement of women's universal suffrage is available in almost all democracies. However, participation in politics does not only include voting, but also decision-making, policy-formulation and representation of the interests of all sectors in society. Feminists who see institutions as vital in the movement for greater women's participation advocate for more constitutional change—change that includes gender equality operations and mechanisms (Mackay et al, 2010).

## **Conceptual Framework**

### *Institutions*

Institutions can cover a wide array of rules, norms, beliefs, conventions, practices and ideas that are either legalized by the constitution (formal institutions) or simply commonly agreed upon by the people (informal institutions). The study of formal institutions comes with a more structured form of obtaining empirical evidence as opposed to non-written codes of conduct. Therefore, this study will concentrate on formal institutions that are avenues for progressive women's participation (Mackay et al, 2010).

### *Electoral and Internal Party Quotas*

Gender quotas have been established in numerous democratic countries all over the world to increase gender balance in politics. Quotas are defined as positive reinforcement based on a determined rate for candidacy and representation of a particular sector for elective positions (Dahlerup, 2006). Quotas generally make visible to decision-making and policy-formulation marginalized groups in society.

According to Dahlerup (2006), quota systems have two dimensions. The first dimension is “where the quotas system is mandated.” This includes the government-level, wherein the electoral law on gender balance is ensued (electoral quota), and the party-level (internal party quota), where political parties voluntarily engage in gender quotas for their electoral list. The second dimension refers to the “level of the selection and nomination process,” wherein gender balance can be implemented from the list of nominees and/or those already elected to office. Bodies that employ gender quotas may implement different forms of strategies, such as setting deadlines and target rates—known as “soft quotas.”

International organizations have been pushing for the equal representation of women in nomination and all decision-making procedures. The basic principle for setting electoral and internal party quotas is to rectify the inherent discriminatory practices and lack of balance in gender relations in political parties and the present political institutions, not the incapacity of women to handle politics. Furthermore, the application of electoral gender quotas is utilized in all levels of governance—national, regional, local and supranational (European Parliament, 2008).

## **Review of Related Literature**

### *Gender-Specific or Gender-Neutral*

Gender quotas can be patterned in two ways—gender-specific or gender-neutral. The quota

system is one that follows a gender-specific quota, merely setting a minimum rate for women's participation, while gender-neutral quotas promote minimum and maximum rates for both genders, usually within a 60-40 ratio in a pool of elected candidates. This type of quota sets a minimum for both men and women, therefore excluding the probability that there may be more than 60 percent of women in elective positions (Suk, 2013). However, there are issues raised against gender quotas as discussed below.

### *Issues Facing Gender Quotas*

With every change adopted by institutions, there are opposing arguments posed by society itself or interest groups. With regard to gender quotas in democratic systems, opposing arguments include: 1.) Politics at a democratic stance should focus on representing the interest and ideologies of the general population, not on gender representations 2.) Elective position should be based on qualifications and competition rather than pre-selecting based on the gender of potential candidates, which is considered a deterrent to the principle of equal opportunities, as one group is privileged over the other 3.) Discrimination is a central factor of quotas, as it is a zero-sum game—the increase in elective seats of one gender will lead to the decrease of the other 4.) The freedom of political parties to select candidates independent from external influence is compromised when quota systems require a certain number of women to be elected 5.) Psychologically speaking, if women had the desire to hold elective offices, then gender equilibrium can be reached without “affirmative” mechanisms 6.) Quotas undermine the foundations of democracy as being representative. The electorate should have the option of choosing their representatives regardless of gender and 7.) Quotas for women will result in a ripple effect for the quota system. Other sectors will desire a quota system based on their degree of “marginalization” (European Parliament, 2008).

Feminists advocating for gender quotas have addressed the questions of validity and equity of the quota system. Their responses cover the following: 1.) Public political organizations and agencies should indicate major sectors within a society—about half of the population consists of women; therefore, women should constitute half of representative positions 2.) The rights of women to equal representation cannot be fulfilled if men hold more than three quarters of parliamentary seats 3.) Quotas are means to eliminate obstacles that prevent women from attaining equality in a gender balanced political arena 4.) Women's abilities and capabilities are overlooked in a patriarchal system, whether overtly or covertly and 5.) The quota system is a reaction against the discrimination of women in political assemblies (European Parliament, 2008).

The presence of quota systems is indeed a means to an end—justice. Opponents assert that it is the removal of certain formal hindrances, particularly the voting rights of women, that equality is achieved within the realm of politics. However, discrimination does not occur only within the purview of universal suffrage, but manifests in other forms such as lack of representation or underrepresentation in decision-making bodies and policy formulation. Instead of taking the passive stance of accepting the disintegration of formal discriminatory institutions, the extent of women's political influence can be further achieved with the exercise of affirmative mechanisms; they foster substantive equal opportunities and greater results of equality (Jarvis 2013; European Union, 2008).

Introducing reform leads to a better realization of democracy. Democracy promotes the interests of the general population, which include those of both men and women (Mackay et al., 2010). Therefore, including women in the decision-making processes creates a more representative government. A government that has a ruling elite, cannot be considered a true democracy because when policies are passed based on majority vote, the majority are men. A quota smoothens out

inadequacies brought about by previous discriminatory institutions (Jarvis, 2013).

### *Women's Representation in Europe*

Many European countries have advanced democratic welfare states with emphasis on equitably allocating social benefits and public goods for their citizenry. At the same, many countries in Europe, as a response to being integrated or in the process of becoming integrated into the European Union, are undergoing marketization, regionalization, decentralization, and constitutional reforms. In Eastern Europe, after the collapse of the Soviet Union's communism, there has been greater need for structural reforms and institutional changes as requisite for "Europeanization."

Over the span of ten years, from 1998 to 2008, parliamentary seats occupied by women in European states rose from 15.2 percent to 21.1 percent. Of the four countries selected for this study, only one, Belgium, has mandated electoral quotas for women. The rest, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands employ an internal party quota system, wherein some political parties have quotas for women for electoral lists, although they are not noncompulsory. There are some political parties that do not accommodate gender quotas (European Parliament, 2008). In Europe, the constitutionally mandated quotas have been created as responses to political instability and demands for constitutional reform. Advocates of gender balance in politics took this opportunity to push for the legalization of affirmative measures for their advantage.

Institutions remain stagnant over time, and this trait configures and increases the predictability of certain behaviors of individuals. It is also this same trait of institutions that makes it difficult to introduce change within a system. Change is triggered by cleavages in theoretical assumptions and practices in reality. Radical change can be instituted during times of critical junctures or world events that lead people to believe, even momentarily, that reform is necessary and achievable (Mackay et al, 2010). In Europe, many critical junctures were seized by feminists in lobbying women's rights and representation in political bodies.

The selected countries for statistical analysis in this study, which include Belgium, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands, have employed different types of gender quota systems.

## **Methodology of the Study**

### *Hypothesis*

1. The presence of electoral quotas is correlated with an increase in the percentage of women, in decision-making bodies.
2. The presence of electoral quotas is correlated with an increase in the percentage of women occupying seats in parliament.
3. The number of political parties employing internal party voluntary quotas is correlated with an increase in the percentage of women in decision-making bodies.
4. The number of political parties employing internal party voluntary quotas is correlated with an increase in the percentage of women nominees in electoral lists of political parties
5. The number of political parties employing internal party voluntary quotas is correlated with an increase in the percentage of women occupying seats in parliament.

### *Objectives*

The objective of this paper is to prove that institutionalization of women's rights creates quotas for women for electoral participation. Countries selected in this paper are democracies and advocate principles that are akin to them. Providing women with structural and institutional avenues such as electoral and party quotas will help achieve a gender-balanced and egalitarian society.

### *Scope of Research*

This paper aims to compare and contrast women's electoral participation in four European countries: Belgium, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands. These countries were selected because of the availability of literature and data on women. Furthermore, these countries are comparable as they are all founding members of the European Union (EU). The EU has drafted frameworks for women's active roles in policy-formulation and decision-making in the local, national, and supranational levels (European Parliament, 2008). They have, thus, the same goals to promoting women's participation in the political sphere.

The dataset was provided by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) of the University of Chicago. The quantitative dataset was based on a two-year study of the University of the Chicago (2008-2010) published by the Inter-University Consortium of Political and Social Research. Economic and educational statuses are not taken into account, as these data are not available. The selected countries are not representative of the entirety of Europe, or even Western Europe. However, it is still important to look at activities concerning women's political rights in these countries. In analyzing institutions that promote women's political participation, other countries that strive for an egalitarian society might find the results of this study useful.

### *Method of Research*

Feminist supporters of the gender quota system presuppose that a causal relation will occur between the degree of women representatives in policy-formulation and decision-making offices, and "women-friendly" policies. Descriptive representation, the former, only focuses on the numerical value of women's presence in the political arena, while substantive representation, the latter, whether advocated by men and/or women, will produce policies advancing women's importance and equality in the society (Reingold, 2006).

This study utilized the descriptive representation based on statistical data provided by the ICPSR of the University of Chicago. While accounting for substantive representation is optimal to generate well-rounded conclusions, data on "women-friendly" policies are difficult to obtain. Although it is not plausible to make scientifically-based claims that the percentage of women as political representatives will automatically result in more policies for women, the study is still relevant in determining the level of equality (or inequality) a country has achieved. The related literature provided the background of the political treatment of women in the four countries.

### *Operationalization of Variables*

Variables for the quantitative data that were analyzed included: 1.) electoral quotas for women, 2.) internal voluntary party quotas, 3.) seats occupied in current or last parliament (on or before 2010), 4.) percentage share of female nominees on parties' electoral lists for parliament and 5.) percentage share of women in decision-making bodies. The dataset will be analyzed using

SPSS 21.0 through bivariate correlation, Pearson's  $r$ , chi-square test and frequency distribution were utilized to come up with results for the quantitative data.

Electoral and internal voluntary party quotas are gender quotas, which are indicators of formal institutions present in a state. Indicators for descriptive representation of women's electoral participation include seats occupied in current or last parliament (on or before 2010), percentage share of female nominees on parties' electoral lists for parliament, and percentage share of women in decision-making bodies.

### *Method of Analysis*

Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used. Descriptive analysis was used for the frequency distribution of the formal institution variables in the study (electoral and internal party quotas). A chi-square test of independence was used to look into the association between two nominal variables, electoral quotas and internal voluntary quotas. Chi-square in this study was used as descriptive statistics, and not as inferential statistics. A correlation was also calculated using *Pearson's  $r$* , between a nominal variable and a scale variable, that being electoral quotas (Belgium) and internal voluntary party quotas (Germany, Italy and the Netherlands), and variables on a descriptive representation of women to determine the relationship of formal institutions and women's descriptive representation. Data were analyzed using SPSS 21.0.

## **Presentation and Analysis of the Results of the Quantitative Data**

### *Socio-Demographics of the Sample Population*

Belgium engages in constitutionally mandated electoral quotas. Germany, Italy and the Netherlands, on the other hand, have internal party quotas, which are voluntarily adopted by political parties. In analyzing each country's chi-square and *Pearson's  $r$  correlation*, Belgium, having electoral quota, is the only country that was analyzed for electoral quotas. Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands' internal voluntary party quotas were correlated with women's descriptive representations. A frequency distribution for internal party quotas was done for all countries to provide an overview of each country's internal party quota.

Figure 1 illustrates the frequency percentage distribution of political parties employing internal party quotas in contrast to parties that do not employ a gender quota system. The Netherlands has the lowest percentage of parties employing quotas, with a value of 18.2 percent. In Italy, 35 percent of the political parties employ internal party quotas. Germany and Belgium show higher frequencies, with 67 percent and 70 percent employing quotas respectively.

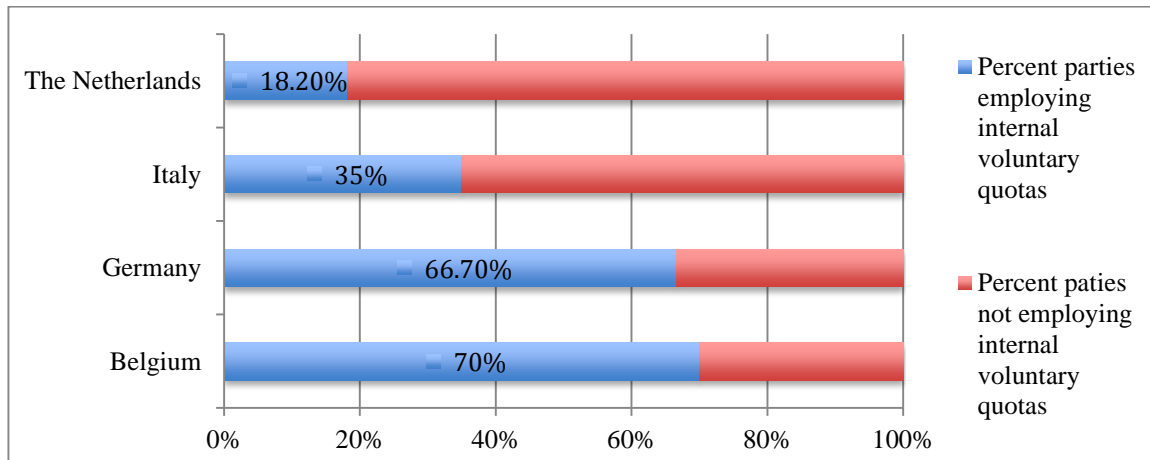
**Figure 1. Frequency Distribution of Internal Party Quotas**

Table 1 shows the results of the chi-square test of independence and Cramer's V between formal institutions, electoral quotas for Belgium and internal party quotas for Germany, Italy and the Netherlands, and descriptive representation of women. Meanwhile, Table 2 shows the results of the Pearson's r correlation between formal institutions and descriptive representation of women. As can be seen in Figure 1, Table 1 and Table 2, countries that employ low internal voluntary party quotas—The Netherlands and Italy—show weak to no significance of internal party quotas affecting descriptive representation of women (seats occupied in current or last parliament (on or before 2010), percentage share of female nominees on parties' electoral lists for parliament, and percentage share of women in decision-making bodies), while Germany and Belgium, both with high internal party quotas have moderate to significant correlations with women's descriptive representation.

**Table 1. Chi-Square Test of Independence between Electoral Quotas and Internal Voluntary Quotas**

Formal institutions	Chi-square value (significance)	Cramer's V (significance)
Electoral quotas x internal voluntary quotas	1.652	0.199 (weak)

**Table 2. Pearson's Correlation between Formal Institutions (Electoral Quotas for Belgium and Internal Voluntary Quotas for Germany, Italy and the Netherlands) and Descriptive Representation of Women**

Formal institutions indicator	Country	Women's descriptive representation	Pearson's r (tabular r=0.95)	p-value (alpha, 0.05, 1-tailed)
	Belgium	Percentage share of female in decision-making bodies	0.032 (insignificant)	0.470

<b>Electoral quotas for women</b>		Percentage share of female nominees on parties' electoral lists for parliament	-	-
		Percentage share of women occupying seats in current or last parliament	0.459 (moderate)	0.91
<b>Internal voluntary party quotas</b>	Germany	Percentage share of female in decision-making bodies	0.768 (significant)	0.037
		Percentage share of female nominees on parties' electoral lists for parliament	0.781 (significant)	0.033
		Percentage share of women occupying seats in current or last parliament	0.483 (moderate)	0.166
	Italy	Percentage share of female in decision-making bodies	0.030	0.451
		Percentage share of female nominees on parties' electoral lists for parliament	0.250	0.458
		Percentage share of women occupying seats in current or last parliament	0.508 (significant)	0.011
	The Netherlands	Percentage share of female in decision-making bodies	0.434	0.91
		Percentage share of female nominees on parties' electoral lists for parliament	0.094	0.392
		Percentage share of women occupying seats in current or last parliament	0.209	0.269

What is clear from the dataset and the quantitative analysis of women's electoral participation in this study is that institutional politics and processes of structural changes and reforms have become increasingly intertwined with gender. Development in European politics vis-à-vis gender relations, show this trend too. For instance, there have been the strategies to include gender in broader constitutional reforms in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland in the 1990s (European Parliament, 2008), and the redefinition of the concepts of citizenship and representation for gender equality in the European Union. In France, Belgium and Portugal, parity democracy has been promoted through amendment of the constitution to explicitly codify women's rights. Based on the quantitative data in this study, having structures such as electoral quotas and internal party quotas are vital in promoting women's electoral participation in political bodies operationalized as actually occupying seats in parliament, and occupying seats in decision-making bodies. Hence, the agenda for gender equality can be achieved not only through extralegal means such as feminist struggles in social movements, but mainly through the institutions themselves.

Sundström and Wängnerud (2013) found in their study of locally elected councilors in 167 regions of 18 European countries that lack of formal institutions, hence the presence of informal

institutions, adversely affects the proportion of locally elected women councilors. They concluded that local political problems such as corruption, partiality, and ineffectiveness of government substantially affect the proportion of female councilors.

In Spain, Threlfall (2005) showed how strong internal political party leadership and party procedures are in achieving gender parity in elective positions in the country. Threlfall stated that party leaders can be persuaded to increase quotas for women in political parties, and this can also be a strategy towards political party legitimization.

Meanwhile, Sloat (2004) described the nature and extent of women's political participation in Central and Eastern Europe post-communist regime. She stated that although there was a decline of women's share in the political arena at the start of post-communism, women had increasingly made some gains in politics since then due to the contributions of formal institutions and civic organization. She also stated that the relative share of women is higher at local levels of governance compared to higher levels, and the role of women in bringing democratic changes in Central and Eastern Europe has greatly contributed to positive efforts for gender parity in governance.

Based on this study and other research, the struggle for gender can be launched through institutional and structural reforms. This is because having women in parliament and in the decision-making bodies will create and establish mechanisms for women-friendly policies in all other spheres of society--whether economic, or cultural, or personal such as the private sphere of the home and family.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Institutions are "value critical," which means that they are laden with political values, norms and routines embedded in the system, and can effect change in order to realize certain goals for the public good, and not solely for the interests of certain groups. It is therefore important that avenues for struggle, such as the issue of gender equality, also be launched at the level of institutions. Institutional opportunities and structures must be in place in order to achieve the goals for gender equality at a faster pace.

As shown in this study, gender quotas are excellent methods in achieving an increase in women's participation in the political sphere, particularly having seats in parliament and in decision-making bodies. Although the descriptive analysis establishes that there is a statistical increase in women's presence in the political sphere, it may not necessarily lead to substantial representation, such as the formulation and implementation of women-friendly policies. However, secondary data from the review of literature show that, in Europe, there is a correlation between descriptive representation and substantive representation. For instance, in Belgium, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands, there are a high number of women in parliament and in decision-making bodies, and as a consequence, several laws, policies, and programs that benefit women have been formulated. There is therefore a probability that higher rates of women's presence in the political sphere swing the political pendulum from a male-dominated arena to a more gender balanced playing field for the benefit of women in particular, and the society in general.

In conclusion, gender quotas, such as electoral quotas or internal party quotas, are an effective policy tool for greater women's representation in political bodies. Political parties and governments should opt to have gender quotas, whether electoral or internal party quotas, to address underrepresentation of women in parliament, decision-making bodies and policy-formulation.

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