

DIFFERENTIAL IMPACT OF ELECTORAL SYSTEMS ON FEMALE POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

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Division for Social Affairs and Employment, Public Health and
Consumer Protection, Women's Rights, Culture, Youth, Education and
the Media

L - 2929 LUXEMBOURG

Tel: (352) 4300-7769

Fax: (352) 4300-7720

EDITOR:

Victoria GARCIA MUNOZ
assisted by Emily CAREY

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Abstract

This report analyses the role of electoral systems in determining the level of female political representation in the European Union. Through examining statistical indicators alone, it becomes apparent that those member states with the highest levels of female political representation (Sweden, Finland, Denmark and the Netherlands) are those which also have **proportional** or **mixed** electoral systems. Indeed, on a worldwide comparison of 162 countries, those which have achieved a

level of 25% or more female Members of Parliament (M.P.s) in lower or single Houses have (without exception) a proportional or mixed electoral system.

In contrast, an examination of those member states with the lowest levels of female political representation (Greece, France and the United Kingdom) reveals **majoritarian** or **mixed** electoral systems. Again, on a worldwide comparison, those countries with a level of 10% or less female M.P.s overwhelmingly share a majoritarian electoral system; those countries which have no women represented in Parliament have (also without exception) a majoritarian or nominal electoral system.

Nevertheless, electoral system alone cannot fully explain the differing levels of female political representation across the European Union. Other factors which should be considered in conjunction with electoral system are:

- **Political Parties** - ideological affiliation; selection process and criteria; party structure and its conduciveness to female promotion within a political hierarchy; party willingness to place women in eligible positions on electoral lists
- **Quotas and Affirmative Action** - both at national and party level; voluntary or legally enforced measures to ensure numerical and executive female representation, especially with regard to placement on electoral lists
- **Cultural and Socio-economic factors** - education and profession, family responsibilities, availability of childcare and family-friendly work practices

Women within the European Union generally have a **higher** level of representation at a **regional level** (E.U. average of **24.9%**) than at national level (**20.53%** across the E.U.), with a slightly **lower level locally** (**20%**). One explanation for this is the use of a **proportional** electoral system at a **regional level** in most countries (eg France has a proportional system at a regional level but a majoritarian system at national level). Those European Member states with upper or second houses, generally have a far lower level of female representation (14.8% on average). Within the E.U. there is a **higher level of female M.E.P.s** (Members of the European Parliament) than at a national level (except in Portugal), with **27.64%**, or 173 women out of 626 M.E.P.s in total.

1. Introduction

"The concept of democracy will only assume true and dynamic significance when political policies and national legislation are decided upon jointly by men and women with equitable regard for the interests and aptitudes of both halves of the population."

Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1997:3.

This study attempts to correlate the role of **electoral systems** with the **level of female political representation in the European Union**. While much current debate focuses on the validity of **quota systems** (and "parity democracy") as an attempt to increase a generally low level of women in political life, electoral systems are often overlooked. The member states of the European Union are not uniform in their choice of electoral systems; while most have adopted proportional

representation, the use of mixed and majoritarian systems still prevails in others. Comparing these different systems (at a national, European, regional and local level) with the varying levels of female political representation across the E.U. enables a picture to be built of **how influential voting systems can be**. However, **other factors**, such as the role of political parties, party lists and quotas, must also be examined in this context, and how they **interact with electoral systems**.

In this study, electoral systems themselves are firstly examined. Then, female political representation in the lower houses of national parliaments are looked at, and any correlation between this and electoral systems will be discussed. Next, the role of political parties in the context of female representation will be explored, followed by affirmative action policies on a national and party level. The rest of this study will then deal with female political representation at an upper house, European Parliament, regional and local level, while also considering the respective influence of electoral systems and other factors in determining the varying degrees of representation.

The **Beijing Platform for Action** (§190) called on governments to establish **gender balance in governmental bodies and committees** (as well as in public administration and the judiciary). This goal was to be achieved through the use of **target figures** and other forms of **affirmative action**. In this regard, some Member States have **implemented programmes whilst avoiding specific quota systems** (eg Sweden). It remains to be seen whether this has a long term effect on the levels of female political representation.

2. Electoral Systems

Two systems of electoral practice exist within the European Union: **majority** or **plurality** systems and **proportional representation (PR)**.

The majority system is the oldest electoral system in the world, and was for a long time the only system used. Its advantage is seen to be its simplicity: the candidate who receives the majority of the votes is declared elected. It is also endorsed as promoting parliamentary stability. However, the main criticism of this type of electoral system is that it is often unfair; a very large parliamentary majority can be given to a party which has won only a minor national victory, and in some instances even give victory to a party which received a smaller percentage of the national vote than the defeated party. Problems also arise from the tendency of the majoritarian system to exclude sections of public opinion, including minorities.

There are two types of majoritarian system: **Simple majority** or "**First-past-the-post**" and **Absolute majority**. **Simple majority** occurs when the candidate who wins the largest number of votes is elected. This means that even if the candidate only obtains a fairly low level of the overall vote (for example, 25%), they are elected as long as no-one else receives a larger number of votes. Within the E.U. this system is only practised in the **United Kingdom**.

Absolute majority combines the effects of both rounds of voting in an absolute majority vote in a single round of voting. The electorate votes for a single candidate

while indicating, in declining order, their preferences for the remaining candidates. If no-one receives an absolute majority in the first count, then the candidate who received the smallest number of votes is eliminated, and the corresponding second choices are counted. This goes on until a candidate obtains an absolute majority as a consequence of transferring votes. This system is used in **France**, where a simple majority is used in the second round.

Proportional representation was first introduced in Belgium in 1889, and has been promoted as a **fairer system of electoral representation**. Political groups receive seats **in proportion to their electoral strength**, and therefore **no single political force should retain a monopoly** as none is excluded from representation. Proportional representation requires party-list voting, and in this way, it is often "political ideas" rather than "personalities" which are the focus of election campaigns. However, one of the main disadvantages of PR is that it can **incite** or **heighten the fragmentation of the political system**, sometimes leading to political **instability**. The system of a party list also removes the voter from the elected, giving the political party a vital role in selecting its candidates.

Party list systems in proportional representation are either **Closed Party lists** or **Preferential Vote**. Closed party lists reflect a political party's control over its candidates, and voters are not given any choice of a party's candidates within a list. The rank candidates occupy on the list indicates their likelihood of a parliamentary seat based on the number of seats won by the list. In preferential vote elections, voters can rank candidates in a different order to that determined by the party. However, voters are limited to voting for one list only.

The principle of proportional representation is that the seats of a constituency are divided on a *pro rata* basis according to the number of votes cast. In terms of constituency, two basic models apply: **Full proportional representation** and **Limited proportional representation**. **Full PR** occurs only when the whole country is considered as a constituency, thereby creating the closest reflection between electoral results and parliamentary representation. Within the E.U., only the **Netherlands** uses the full PR system.

Limited PR occurs when elections are carried out in several constituencies and the distribution of seats takes place at this level. This system creates a greater **distortion** between the number of votes obtained by a party throughout the country and the number of its representatives. As a result, the smaller the number of seats at stake in a constituency, the more difficult it is for the **relative strength of each party to be reflected by seat distribution**. However, when seats are distributed at a local level, local or smaller parties might gain seats in Parliament that they would otherwise not obtain as a result of distribution according to national strength.

Female Political Representation and Electoral System

Most member states have some form of **proportional representation** or **weakened mixed systems** (where PR is weakened by the preference given to parties that receive above a certain level of votes and who are subsequently awarded extra seats) with the exception of **France** and the **United Kingdom** who have a single-member constituency system (France has a two-ballot system and the UK has a plurality "first past the post" system). The **correlation** between a **high level of female political representation** within a lower or single House(2) and the

country's **electoral system** becomes apparent upon comparing the member states (Table 1). In fact, **all countries** in Western Europe where the number of women in Parliament **exceeds 20%** have adopted the **proportional system**.

As the figures show, there is a strong correlation between the level of female representation and the type of electoral system. The countries with the **lowest** levels of female political representation (Italy, the United Kingdom, France and Greece) have either a **Mixed system of weak PR** (where there is voting for party lists and seats are distributed proportionately, but the leading party receives extra seats as a result of reaching a certain level or threshold of votes) or a **Majoritarian** system.

Table 1

| <i>Number of Women in the Lower or Single Houses of National Parliaments of the European Union and the type of Electoral System</i> | | | | | | |
|---|----------------|----------------------|--------------------|--------------|-----------|-----------------------------|
| <i>Order</i> | <i>Country</i> | <i>Last Election</i> | <i>Total Seats</i> | <i>Women</i> | <i>%W</i> | <i>Electoral System</i> |
| 1 | Sweden | 09 1994 | 349 | 141 | 40.4 | Mixed (Closed lists) |
| 2 | Finland | 03 1995 | 200 | 67 | 33.5 | Mixed (Preferential) |
| 3 | Denmark | 09 1994 | 179 | 59 | 33.0 | Proportional (Preferential) |
| 4 | Netherlands | 05 1994 | 150 | 47 | 31.3 | Proportional (Preferential) |
| 5 | Austria | 12 1995 | 183 | 49 | 26.8 | Proportional (Closed lists) |
| 6 | Germany | 10 1994 | 672 | 176 | 26.2 | Mixed/Two (Closed lists) |
| 7 | Spain | 03 1996 | 350 | 86 | 24.6 | Proportional (Closed lists) |
| 8 | Luxembourg | 06 1994 | 60 | 12 | 20.0 | Proportional (Preferential) |
| 9 | Ireland | 11 1992 | 166 | 23 | 13.9 | Proportional (Multi seat) |
| 10 | Portugal | 10 1995 | 230 | 30 | 13.0 | Proportional (Closed list) |
| 11 | Belgium | 05 1995 | 150 | 18 | 12.0 | Proportional (Preferential) |
| 12 | Italy | 04 1996 | 630 | 70 | 11.1 | Mixed (Weak PR) |
| 13 | United Kingdom | 04 1992 | 651 | 62 | 9.5 * | Majoritarian (Plurality) |
| 14 | France | 03 1993 | 577 | 37 | 6.4 ** | Majoritarian (Two ballot) |
| 15 | Greece | 09 1996 | 300 | 19 | 6.3 | Mixed (Weak PR) |

Figures from Inter-Parliamentary Union (1997:90-92, 136) and Inter-Parliamentary Union "Electoral Systems: A Worldwide Comparative Study" (1993).

* Last elections: 05.1997: 18.2%

** Last elections: 06.1997: 10.92%

This correlation is reinforced with the example of **Germany**, which uses a **double or mixed electoral system**, with both single member constituencies and a proportional representation system, each of which select half of the members of the Bundestag. However, the majority of **female politicians** in Germany are elected through the **PR list**.

On a worldwide level, this pattern is repeated: of the five countries in the world who have 30% or more female parliamentarians in their single or lower house (Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark and the Netherlands), three have a **proportional** electoral system, and two have a **mixed** electoral system (with none having a majoritarian system). Of the eight countries that have 29-25% female M.P.s in their lower or single house (New Zealand, Seychelles, Austria, Germany, Iceland, Argentina, Mozambique and South Africa), all have either **proportional** or **mixed** electoral systems (again, none have a majoritarian system). At the lowest worldwide level of female political representation, in those countries with 10% or less women in the lower or single house of Parliament, a far higher proportion have a **majoritarian** electoral system, with nearly 90% of countries that have no female parliamentarians using a majority system.

The apparent strength of proportional representation over the majoritarian system in terms of greater female political representation has been partly explained as being:

"... found in the multi-member constituencies necessitated by PR. Under a single-member constituency system, the candidate selectors might be reluctant to pick a woman as the party's sole candidate, using the excuse, genuine or otherwise, that they believe some voters will be less likely to vote for a woman instead of a man. But when several candidates are to be chosen, it not only is possible but also positively advantageous for a ticket to include both men and women, for an all-male list of five or more candidates is likely to alienate some voters."

Gallagher, Laver and Mair quoted in Council of Europe, 1996:36.

The majoritarian system is seen to be unfair to women because with such an electoral practice, the success of the party heavily depends on the single candidate it selects. This candidate will have been selected on tightly defined criteria, as part of what makes a "successful" nominee; the selection process has been criticised for the emphasis given to "male" characteristics. Female candidacy is often questioned on the assumption that the electorate is less likely to vote for a woman. However, in proportional systems, the selection of candidates for the party list depends on other factors in addition to a candidate's personal appeal. The most important of these is the party's wish to **appeal to as many voters as possible**, which includes listing **female candidates**, as the absence or small number of women on a national electoral list could be a **negative factor** for some of the electorate.

Effect of party lists on female political representation

As Table 1 showed, PR is the electoral system of those member states with the highest and lowest levels of female political representation (Sweden and Greece). Therefore, proportional representation alone is not responsible for the strength of women parliamentarians in other European Union countries. An important factor within PR is the placement of female candidates in **eligible positions on party lists**.

Table 3: Method of Voting in a worldwide comparison of the twelve countries with 25% or more women elected to the lower or single House in 1996

| <i>Order</i> | <i>Country</i> | <i>Percentage of women elected</i> | <i>Electoral System</i> |
|--------------|----------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1 | Sweden | 40.4 | Mixed (Closed lists) |
| 2 | Norway | 39.4 | Proportional (Closed list) |
| 3 | Finland | 33.5 | Mixed (Preferential) |
| 4 | Denmark | 33.0 | Proportional (Preferential) |
| 5 | Netherlands | 31.3 | Proportional (Preferential) |
| 6 | Seychelles | 27.3 | Mixed |
| 7 | Austria | 26.8 | Proportional (Closed lists) |
| 8 | Germany | 26.2 | Mixed (Closed Lists) |
| 9 | Iceland | 25.4 | Proportional (Closed lists) |
| 10 | Argentina | 25.3 | Proportional (Closed lists) |
| 11 | Mozambique | 25.2 | Proportional (Closed lists) |
| 12 | South Africa | 25.0 | Proportional (Closed lists) |

Figures taken from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (1997:136)

As Table 1 showed, the six member states of the European Union with the highest level of female political representation (Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Netherlands, Austria and Germany) are evenly split between those PR electoral systems with **closed lists** and those with **preferential voting**.

However, on a worldwide comparison, out of the twelve countries with a proportion of 25% or more women elected to parliament (See Table 3), eight have a system of **closed lists**, including the two highest ranking countries: Sweden (40.4%) and Norway (39.4%). While other factors such as the **socio-political context** of each country must be taken into account, it can be said that **preferential** systems, where the electorate is left to choose, is a potential **barrier** to female political representation. However, it also implies that **political parties** themselves have a vital role to play in terms of putting female candidates forward in eligible positions; this is especially the case with electoral systems of **closed lists**.

3. Role of Political Parties in Female Political Representation

One of the main functions of political parties is to **nominate** and **back** their candidates for office (through logistic and often financial support), therefore playing a vital role as **gatekeepers** to election. In this way, the selection process of candidates is essential in ensuring female representation. However, many parties do not specifically encourage women to submit their candidatures; research shows that **left-wing** parties appear to be more agreeable towards **positive measures** that would increase the representation of women at an electoral level (like quotas and target figures) than **right-wing** parties, who are more likely to support **non-intervention** in the recruitment and selection process (Council of Europe, 1996:17).

Party mechanisms to encourage women to enter public life

Parties can take different measures to encourage women to enter politics and public life. At the lowest (and non-electoral) level, these measures can be **organisational, training or logistical**.

Organisational measures include the establishment of a **women's branch within a political party**. This is very popular on a worldwide scale, being found in three countries out of four, and in half of the parties surveyed by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (1997:137). It is also popular at a European level, with all member states (with the **exception of Denmark**) having parties which have organised women's branches; an example of this includes **Germany**, where the Social Democratic Party of Germany (**SPD**) has "**The Working Group of Social Democratic Women**" (**ASF**) as one of its nine working groups within the party.

Such an organisational approach is useful in that it is often the **only measure** to assist women into politics. For example, in the **United Kingdom**, all political parties have a women's branch, but very few other measures exist which are aimed at encouraging women into public life. However, the effect of establishing women's branches is **difficult to evaluate**, because the importance assigned to such branches varies greatly between parties. **There is no direct relationship between**

the existence of these branches and a rise in the numbers of women candidates or politicians.

Training includes courses that specifically **prepare women for being candidates or M.P.s**. As an example, in **Germany**, the **Alliance 90/The Greens** organise workshops and congresses to encourage women to stand for election. In general, these measures appear to be less prevalent than the establishment of women's branches, implying that parties are not willing to move **beyond a simple organisation** of female members to encourage women to participate in political life.

Logistical measures include the **provision of childcare** and the **reconciliation of political meeting times with family responsibilities**. Parties that have implemented such measures include the **Austrian People's Party (ÖVP)**, who state that:

"...Most of the measures, such as the financing of kindergartens, are aimed at women who have to organise their children's care because they work. Other measures are to create more part-time jobs and a higher flexibility of working times." (Quoted in Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1997:20)

However, this measure has proved to be the least popular amongst political parties, suggesting a **reluctance** to directly interfere with a traditional division of labour or to take **direct action** in such a culturally sensitive area.

It can be seen from the levels of party responsiveness that **commitment towards mechanisms to encourage women to enter public life varies according to the degree of direct action needed**. Establishing a separate women's branch is often used as a means of **direct support** and even **fundraising** for that party itself, rather than to solely encourage female candidates. There are also criticisms over the potential for marginalising women within a separate women's organisation rather than incorporating them into the mainstream party culture and decision-making process. In the case of **Denmark**, the **Social Democratic Party** established women's committees from 1929-69, but it was felt that these *"primarily functioned to transmit the politics of the party leadership to women, rather than operating in the reverse direction"* (Quoted in Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1997:22).

As the Inter-Parliamentary Union commented, *"Are women's branches there to serve women or are they just one more structure serving parties?"* (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1997:21)

Offering training, providing childcare and changing meeting times to allow for family responsibilities are explicit measures that **confront existing political and social cultures**, and whose **primary benefit** will be felt by **women**, not both sexes. It may be concluded that this is a reason why parties have been more reluctant to adopt organisational and training measures for women.

Party selection processes

Selection of a candidate for office is ultimately decided by the central power of a political party. In an attempt to establish **uniformity** in the selection process, clear **guidelines** have been set up to control both **selection criteria** and the **process**

itself. Many parties argue that this **standardisation of procedure** gives women an **equal chance of qualifying for selection**; however, such uniformity has been criticised for the importance given to essentially **male characteristics**.

Those wanting to become parliamentary candidates often have to undergo a long **political apprenticeship** or **political volunteer work** before they have a good chance of being selected. This can prove a problem for many women, who due to constraints of family, have less time available for such party work. In many selection committees (especially those from a majoritarian electoral system), a "successful" candidate is often seen to be a white professional male, and the selectors might feel obliged in selecting such a **"safe"** candidate over a female one. In addition, nearly all political parties are **headed by male politicians** who are the party's role model; it is likely therefore that masculine selection criteria will dominate decisions. **Table 5** shows the **likelihood** of both men and women **becoming both candidates and M.P.s: in no country do women have a greater chance** of either than men. The Council of Europe (1996:31) recommends that such selection procedures are **reformed** to make them **gender neutral**.

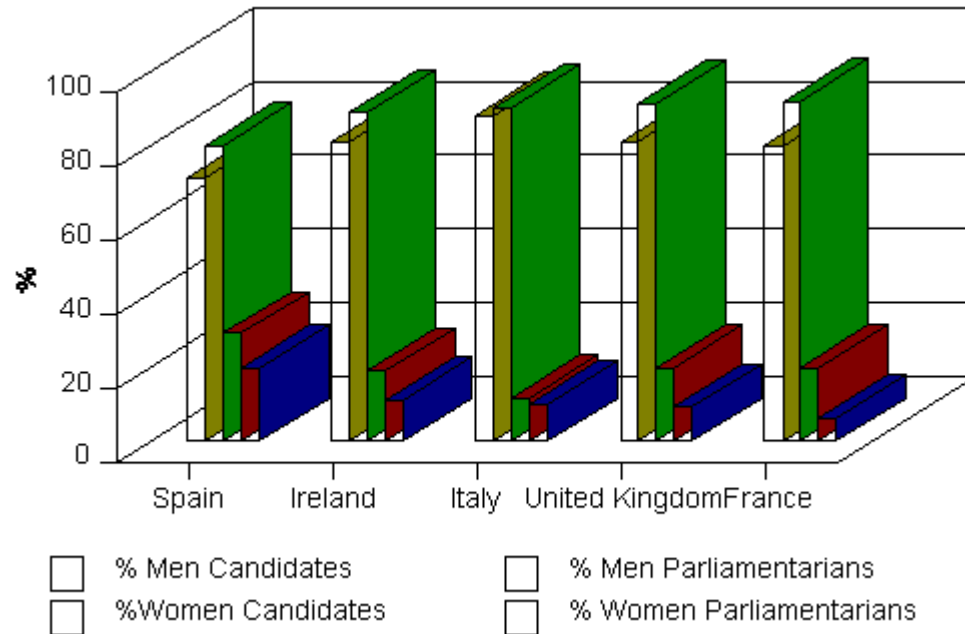
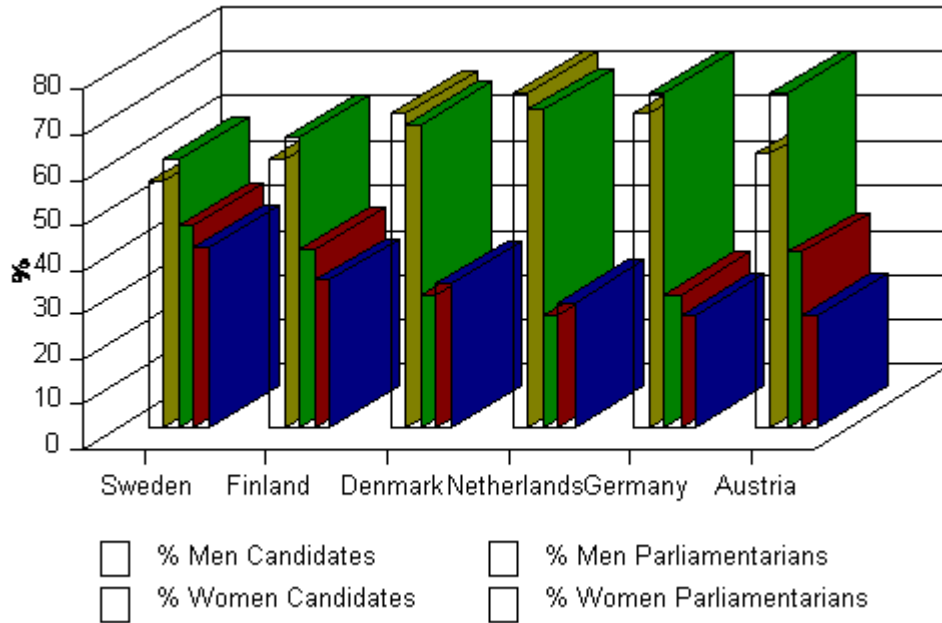
Other mechanisms to help women stand for election

In addition to political parties, both member state governments and NGOs have also played a role in encouraging women to stand for and participate in elections. Whilst the rights to vote and stand for election are complimentary, the rate of voting activity among women across the E.U. is far higher than standing as candidates for office. Indeed, in some member states (for example Finland and the United Kingdom), **voting activity is greater for women than for men**. Some governments (like Austria) have programmes to raise women's awareness about the importance of voting and standing for election.

Whilst there are many NGOs that campaign to better the status of women, few are specifically dedicated to encouraging women to participate in public life. In **Finland**, the **Coalition of Finnish Women's Associations for Joint Action** has a membership of more than 600,000 women, and over 20% of all women in Finland are members of a registered women's organisation. Before elections, these organisations become active, with publicity and information campaigns.

In the **United Kingdom**, the **300 Group** (campaigning for 300 female M.P.s in the lower house and more women in public life) and **EMILY's** list (financial support for female candidates, whatever their party) encourage women's candidature in elections, while the **Fawcett Society** campaigns to increase the influence of women's issues at an electoral level.

Table 5:
Respective Chances of Men and Women of Becoming M.P.s: women and men candidates/total candidates - women and men M.P.s/totalM.P.s



Note: Countries listed in descending order of proportion of female M.P.s; both Houses considered; figures taken are for most recent elections.

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union (1997:54)

4. Quotas and Affirmative Action to increase female participation in political life

"On a strictly interim basis, affirmative action measures may be taken. Wherever the measure chosen is a quota system, it is proposed that the quota should not target women, but that, in the spirit of equity, it may be established that neither sex may occupy a proportion of seats inferior to a given percentage."

Extract from IPU Plan of Action (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1997:61).

Quotas have been used selectively in some E.U. member states, and are regarded as **temporary measures** to compensate for the **inequality of women's representation in public life**. Two types of quotas exist that are aimed at increasing female political participation, both at elections and in senior posts within government or public administration. These are either:

- Quotas created through **national legislation**, or
- Quotas created by **political parties**

Quotas created through national legislation aim to influence the **result of an election**; namely to guarantee that a certain number or percentage of seats are given to women. Quotas that are established through political parties aim to **affect candidature**; this is achieved through ensuring that a specified number of candidates are women or that neither sex numbers over a certain level on the electoral lists.

Criticisms of Quotas

Where affirmative action plans in the form of quotas have been introduced, noticeable results have been achieved in terms of an **increase in women successfully standing for election** (and holding office at senior levels of government). Nevertheless, the use of quotas remains **controversial**.

Criticisms of quotas include:

- the fairness of such mechanisms
- whether it is merely tokenism
- the establishment of a hierarchy between those M.P.s that were elected "on merit" through all stages of the election process, and those female M.P.s that were elected using a reserved seat
- if it is sufficient alone to affect female representation or if other specific measures are needed to strengthen it

Opponents of quotas argue that they are **discriminatory, interventionist** and **fundamentally undemocratic**. Many countries (including Italy, the United Kingdom and France) have rejected the use of quotas at a national level with the argument that it is essentially **at odds with the precept of equality between both sexes which has been enshrined either in their constitution or national legislation**. Quotas aimed at increasing the number of women in political life have been criticised for being **discriminatory against other under represented groups in society**: if women are represented through quotas, why shouldn't other groups be similarly represented? Moreover, it has been claimed that passing a constitutional amendment

would be a **permanent** rather than a **temporary measure** to compensate for the lack of women in elective bodies.

*"Yes, the quota system has facilitated women's access, not only in parties applying quotas but also in other parties. Quotas, once established, are not questioned but introducing exact quotas can create turbulence: **throwing out well established politicians for the benefit of less experienced women can be felt unfair.**"*

Excerpt from Sweden on the appraisal of the quota system, quoted in Inter-Parliamentary Union (1997:75).

Quotas also attract criticism for being **tokenistic**, claiming that **individual competence and political commitment should be the basis for selection** rather than the need to **ensure a certain number of women** are represented in parliament. In the **United Kingdom**, women hold **28% of publicly appointed posts**, a figure achieved **without the use of quotas**. The British government has stated that using quotas would **undermine women's efforts to demonstrate their abilities on merit**. There is also a danger that quotas lead to a **hierarchy** within M.P.s themselves, between those who were elected **without the help of quotas** (and experiencing all the stages of the election process) being somehow **superior** to those who did **use quotas**. This **reinforces** the already **disadvantaged place women hold in public life**.

Finally, **quotas cannot be seen as being a complete solution to female under representation in public life**. The use of quotas has to be **accompanied by other measures**, such as the **placement of women in high rankings on electoral roles**. This is shown by the example of the **Belgian Socialist Party**, who, despite the application of a one third quota to the electoral role, have fewer than a third of their elected candidates as women because the **quota does not affect the places of female candidates on the party list**, and they are often near the bottom (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1997:75). **Belgium**, the **only country with a legislative quota**, is only **11th** in the E.U. for women parliamentarians. Other measures needed include **heightened publicity** to encourage more women to stand (so **increasing the range of candidates and competency** from which to select), placing more women in **visible political positions** and having more **family friendly work practices** within parliaments.

While quotas remain controversial, they are frequently **debated** within the legislatures of the member states. Although they have often been rejected as a way of correcting the gender imbalance within parliaments, such debate is useful in that it publicly **highlights the existence of such inequality** and asks for **practical solutions** to this persisting problem. When quotas have been adopted, there has also been a **"snowball" effect** as other parties realise that the selection or appointment of more women (either with or without quotas) is a way to **broaden their electoral appeal**.

Quotas created through national legislation

Quotas established by law uniformly affect all political parties in that country. Of all the E.U. member states, only **Belgium** has a national law which has established a quota for women in political representation. This law, passed on 24 May 1994, specifies that there should be a statutory quota of **25% female candidatures on**

party lists in every election (this figure is to increase to 33.3% from 1999 onwards). If the **quota is not fulfilled**, then the law specifies that positions on the list which are legally reserved for women but not occupied by female candidates **will remain blank**. Therefore, if not enough women are put on the list, then the number of candidates will be reduced in equal measure. The success of this measure was shown in the 1994 local elections, when the number of female candidates elected to the local councils **increased by half** to 20% of the total (it had previously been around 10%).

Apart from Belgium, both **France** and **Italy** have attempted to establish quotas through national legislation. In 1982, **France** passed a law establishing a quota of **25%** female candidatures on **party lists for municipal elections**. However, this was legally challenged, and in September 1982, the Constitutional Council ruled that such legislation was **incompatible with the principle of equality** and therefore **unconstitutional**. In **Italy**, two electoral laws were implemented in 1993; the first law stated that on party lists, **neither sex could be represented by more than 75% of all candidates**. The second law established that male and female candidates would appear **alternately on party lists** (known as the "**zipper system**"). However, in 1995, the Constitutional Court declared the laws **unconstitutional** on the basis of **violating equal treatment legislation**.

In addition to national legislation controlling electoral practice, other quota systems exist for candidates appointed to committees or advisory bodies in an attempt to promote more women in public life generally. An example of this is **Finland**, where a 1987 law specifies that women and men must sit on consultative councils, committees and other decision-making bodies **in as equal a manner as possible**. This law was amended in 1995, stipulating that **at least 40% of one sex** (either male or female) must be represented. As a result of this law, the number of women on such decision-making bodies has **risen from 25% in 1980 to 48% in 1996**.

In **Denmark**, the Parliament passed a law in 1985 also stating that **all public committees must have a gender-balanced composition**; the law stated that any organisations represented on a committee had to **nominate both a woman and a man for each position**, and it would then be up to the minister responsible to select among the candidates in a manner that would achieve a gender-balance. This has resulted in an **increase of female representation** on public committees, rising from **12% to 37%**. In 1991, the Danish Parliament subsequently decided that **all government institutions and state bodies should have affirmative action plans** (including the establishment of targets for women in high-ranking positions). In the light of the Beijing Platform for Action, it is hoped that other member state governments will follow this policy.

Quotas created by political parties

Nine of the member states have a system of quotas applied at party level. In Table 6, these are examined by country and party.

The Nordic countries have especially used quotas successfully over a longer period of time than other member states. For example, the **Danish People's Socialist Party** introduced quotas in the **early 1970s**, specifying that **either sex** had to be represented with **at least 40% of electoral candidates**. The effects of quotas can

clearly be seen in the consistently higher numbers of women in the parliaments of these countries over time.

Another example of the use of quotas by parties is the **Social Democratic Party of Germany**, which established the use of quotas for both **electoral office** (33%) and **internal party structure** (40%). This has resulted in an increase of women elected to 33.7%, and an increase in women at senior levels of the party hierarchy.

However, quotas applied by parties can be **overridden by national judiciaries**. In the **United Kingdom**, the **Labour Party's introduction of all-female shortlists for 50% of vacant and winnable seats** was **overturned by an Industrial Tribunal** in January 1996, which ruled in favour of rejected male candidates that the policy was **against the "Sex Discrimination Act"** of 1975. The result has been that the selection process from all-female shortlists was suspended, and the Party announced that the policy would not be continued after the next election.

Instead of using a strict quota system with a fixed percentage of female candidates (or a minimum number of candidates of either sex), some parties are now establishing **through custom or unofficial rules, methods of selecting candidates that is almost identical to applying a quota**. The clearest example of this is in **Norway** (although not a member state), where **all political parties aim to include 50% of women in their party lists**, despite many not having an established quota system.

The use of **quotas alone** is **not sufficient to ensure high levels of female political representation** (refer to above note about Belgium): often other forms of **affirmative action** is needed, especially concerning **party lists** (see Table 7). In **Sweden**, the **KDS party** has an **informal agreement to apply the "zipper system"** (alternating the sexes on the party list). The zipper system is very popular in Sweden, with **five parties using it to achieve a gender balance**. Its success can be seen in the high level of female parliamentarians returned over elections of the past 15 years.

With the decline of female membership of political parties in the E.U. since the 1980s (from an already low level), it is likely that quota systems will increasingly be adopted by parties as a way of attracting more women, both as voters and potential candidates.

Table 6

| <i>Quotas of women's candidatures set by parties for legislative elections (either by rule or custom)</i> | | |
|---|------------------|------------------------------|
| <i>Country</i> | <i>Party</i> | Quota (in %) * |
| Austria | Greens | 50.0 |
| | ÖVP | 33.0 |
| | Social Democrats | ? |
| Belgium | Volkunie | 25.0 |
| Denmark | SDP | both women and men aim: 40.0 |
| France | PS | 30.0 |
| Germany | B90/Greens | 50.0 |

| | | |
|-----------------------|-----------|-----------|
| | PDS | 50.0 |
| | SPD | 33.0 |
| Greece | ND | ? |
| Ireland | Fine Gael | aim: 40.0 |
| | Labour | 20.0 |
| Sweden | SDP | 50.0 |
| | VP | 50.0 |
| | MpG | 50.0 |
| | FP | 40.0 |
| United Kingdom | Labour | aim: 50.0 |

Figures compiled from Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1997:67

* Unless otherwise stated, quotas established are through rule or custom

Table 7

| <i>Other forms of Affirmative Action taken by Political Parties</i> | | |
|---|--------------|---|
| <i>Country</i> | <i>Party</i> | <i>Affirmative Action</i> |
| Sweden | SAP | Use of "zipper system" in electoral list |
| | FP | Zipper system / Systematically includes at least one woman in a winnable position on a closed party list |
| | VP | Zipper system |
| | MpG | Zipper system |
| | KDS | Zipper system |
| Austria | ÖVP | Systematically includes at least one woman in a winnable position on a closed party list / Gives women priority in the allocation of electoral remainders |
| Germany | B90/Greens | Zipper system |
| | CSU | Asks party bodies to place women in "prominent" positions on party lists in proportional elections |

Figures compiled from Inter-Parliamentary Union (1997:40-41)

5. Female political representation in Upper Houses/Second Chambers

Due to both **differing numbers and electoral practices**, it is difficult to make an accurate comparison between either upper houses within the E.U. or between upper and lower/single houses. However, where they exist, upper houses serve as a

counter-balance to the policies and legislation of the lower houses. Members of upper houses are either elected or appointed by the government or parliament (and such appointments are often used as a political reward for long serving party members or activists). Therefore it is interesting that in E.U. member states (with the exception of **Belgium**) where there are upper houses, there is often a **significantly lower number of female parliamentarians than in the lower houses** (see Table 9). Indeed, on a **worldwide comparison** there are **fewer women in the upper houses** (1997=9.8% of the total) than in the lower house (1997=12.0%; Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1997:82). **Belgium** has over **10% more women** in the **upper house** than in the lower house.

Table 9

| <i>Number of Women in Upper House or Senate in National Parliaments in the E.U. and type of Electoral System</i> | | | | | | |
|--|----------------|----------------------|--------------------|--------------|-------------|--|
| <i>Order</i> | <i>Country</i> | <i>Last Election</i> | <i>Total Seats</i> | <i>Women</i> | <i>% W.</i> | <i>Electoral System</i> |
| 1 | Netherlands | 05 1995 | 75 | 17 | 22.7 | Proportional (Preferential) |
| 2 | Belgium | 05 1995 | 71 * | 16 | 22.5 | Proportional (Preferential) |
| 3 | Austria | 11 1994 | 64 | 13 | 20.3 | Elected by provincial legislative assemblies |
| 4 | Germany | 10 1994 | 68 | 13 | 19.1 | Appointed by Parliaments of the Federated States (Länder) |
| 5 | Spain | 03 1996 | 208 ** | 31 | 14.9 | Provincial level : Party- list, simple majority |
| 6 | Ireland | 03 1993 | 60 | 8 | 13.3 | Nominated by Prime Minister: 11 Elected by Universities: 6 Proportional (Multi seat): 43 |
| 7 | Italy | 04 1996 | 326 | 26 | 8.0 | Regionally elected with 65% maj.: 315 Others: Appointed & life members |
| 8 | United Kingdom | - | 1190 | 82 | 6.9 | Hereditary peers, life peers or clergy |
| 9 | France | 09 1995 | 321 | 18 | 5.6 | Indirect election (majority and some proportional) |

Figures compiled from Inter-Parliamentary Union (1997:90-92), Inter-Parliamentary Union (1993) and Instituto de la Mujer (1997).

* In addition to these elected seats, 52 Seats are filled by the provincial councils, 26 are co-opted and 1 is held *ex officio* by a member of the Royal Family; there are no figures for the number of women among these

** In addition to this, some Senators are designated by the legislative assemblies of the autonomous regions or appointed by the King; the figure above includes only directly elected seats

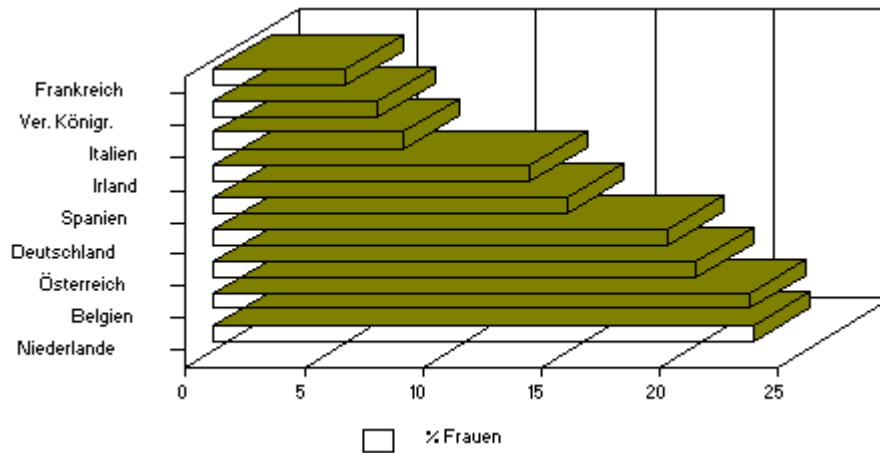
It can be seen that the two countries with the **highest levels of women** in the upper house (**Netherlands** and **Belgium**) both have electoral systems which are **proportional** and use **preferential voting**. This reinforces (albeit from a limited example) the earlier point that countries with a **proportional electoral system** generally have a **higher level of female parliamentarians**.

The country with the **lowest level of women in its upper house** in the E.U. is **France**, which uses an **indirect system of election** that relies on departmental electoral colleges. In France, a **two-round majority system** applies in departments returning up to four Senators, while **proportional representation with allotment by highest average** applies in other departments. In overseas territories, Senators are elected by an **absolute majority**. Overall, a greater number of senators are elected through the **two-round majority system**. This again confirms the earlier observation that countries with a **majoritarian electoral system have a lower level of female parliamentarians**.

Another possible explanation for the lower number of women in the upper houses is that appointments to them are often **prestige positions, rewards for previously held high political office or years of political service**. As women have generally not reached such office or are viewed by their parties as not being of senior enough importance, they are less likely to receive nominations or appointments to the upper house. In the case of the **United Kingdom, hereditary peerage and the clergy is overwhelmingly a male preserve**, with most hereditary peerages being based on the principle of **primogeniture** (the first born son receiving the family title).

Despite this far lower figure, between 1990 and 1995 there was a **2.6% increase in the number of women in upper houses** across the European Union (matched by a **4% increase of women in lower houses**).

Table 10: Number of Women in the Upper House or Senate in National Parliaments in the European Union.



Figures are taken from Table 9: "Number of Women in Upper House or Senate in National Parliaments in the European Union and type of Electoral System."

6. Female Political Representation in the European Parliament

Despite being a relatively recent political institution, women's representation in the European Parliament is considerably higher than in the national parliaments (with the exception of Portugal). As Tables 11 and 12 show, the figures for women in the European Parliament actually are under 50% except for Finland where they are of 62.5%.

Table 11

| <i>Number of Women elected to the European Parliament in 1995 compared to Women in National Legislatures</i> | | | | |
|--|--------------------|--------------------------------|----------------|---|
| <i>Country</i> | <i>Total Seats</i> | <i>Number of Women elected</i> | <i>% Women</i> | <i>% Women in National Legislatures</i> |
| Europe 15 | 626 | 173(3) | 27.64 | 20.53 |
| Finland | 16 | 10 | 62.5 | 33.5 |
| Sweden | 22 | 10 | 45.45 | 40.4 |
| Denmark | 16 | 7 | 43.75 | 33.0 |
| Germany | 99 | 35 | 35.35 | 26.2 |
| Austria | 21 | 7 | 33.33 | 26.8 |
| Luxembourg | 6 | 2 | 33.33 | 20.0 |
| Spain | 64 | 21 | 32.81 | 24.6 |
| Netherlands | 31 | 10 | 32.26 | 31.3 |
| Belgium | 25 | 8 | 32.00 | 12.0 |
| France | 87 | 26 | 29.89 | 6.4 |
| Ireland | 15 | 4 | 26.67 | 13.9 |
| United | 87 | 16 | 18.39 | 9.5 |

| | | | | |
|----------|----|----|-------|------|
| Kingdom | | | | |
| Greece | 25 | 4 | 16.00 | 6.3 |
| Italy | 87 | 11 | 12.64 | 11.1 |
| Portugal | 25 | 2 | 8.00 | 13.0 |

Figures compiled from Instituto de la Mujer (1997) and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (1997:90-92)

While this figure in no way reflects the **female share of the European Union population** (currently around 52%), it is far higher than the level of women at national legislatures. Most noticeable is the **increase in female M.E.P.s in member states that otherwise have the lowest level of female political representation**: the **United Kingdom, Greece and France**, where the figures for the European Parliament are almost five times (in the case of France) to twice as high (for the United Kingdom) as that of national legislatures. Even in countries where there is **already a high level of female parliamentarians** (Sweden, Finland and Denmark), the **level of women M.E.P.s is higher**.

This figure has also **increased** since the **previous European elections in 1989**, where the number of **female M.E.P.s** across the **European Union 12** (without Austria, Finland and Sweden) was **19.31% of the total**. The only countries where the level of female representation in the European Parliament has **decreased** over this period are **Luxembourg and Portugal**.

7. Female political representation at a regional level

Despite not being a full comparison (as regional level political representation **does not exist** in **Finland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom**), **24.9% of all members of regional assemblies are women** (compared to 20.53% of national legislatures). However, there is no overall clear pattern in the levels of women at regional level political representation; **Sweden** has the highest number, with **47.6%**, nearly achieving parity.

Table 13

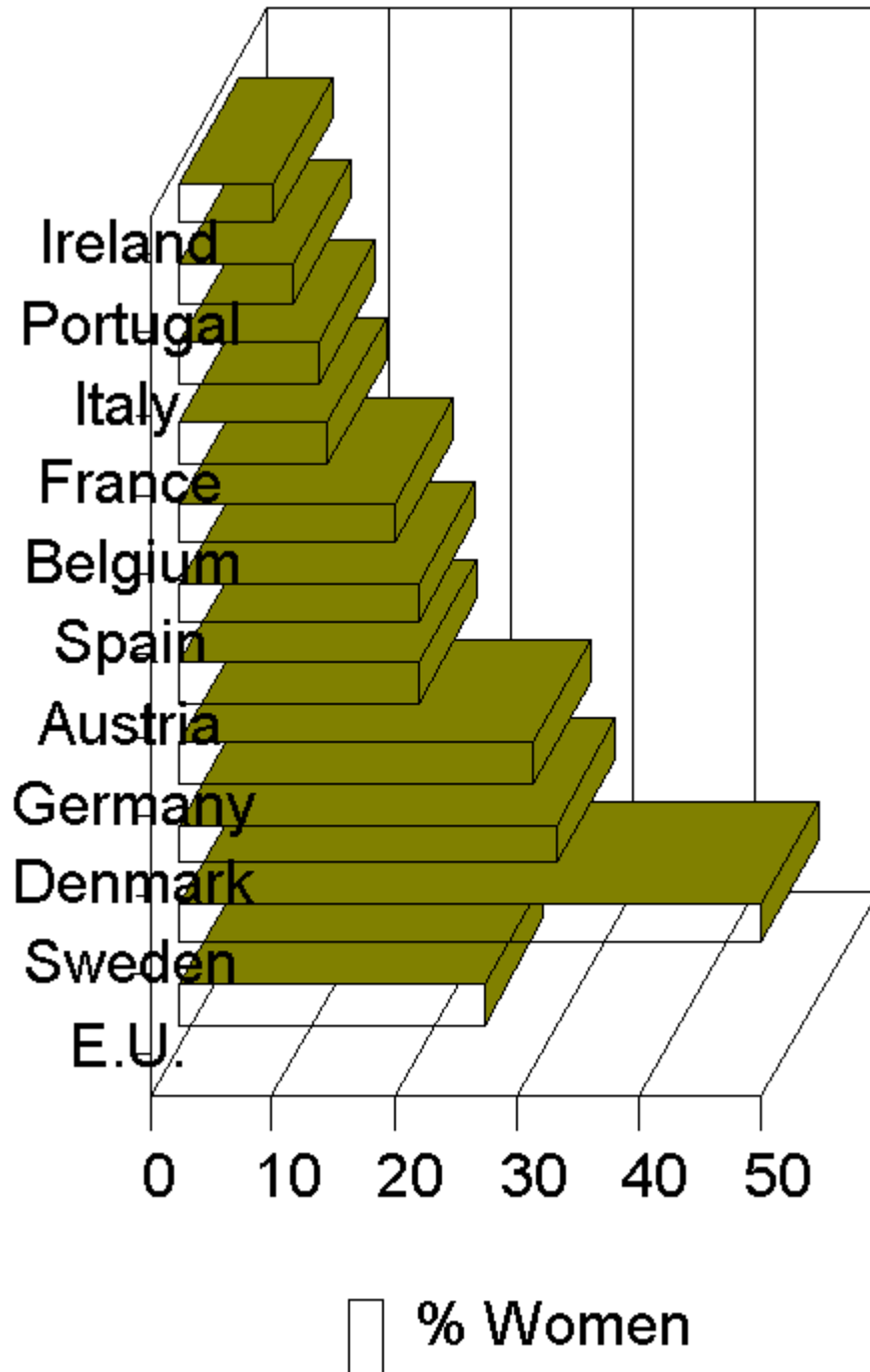
| <i>Participation of Women in the Regional Assemblies of the E.U. 15 and their Electoral Systems</i> | | | | | |
|---|----------------|-------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------|
| Country | Last Elections | Number of regions | % W. in Regional Assembly | Number of women/ total seats | Electoral System |
| E.U. | | 140 | 24.9 | 2237/8971 | |
| Sweden | 1994 | 23 | 47.6 | 845/1775 | Proportional |
| Denmark | 1993 | 14 | 31.0 | 116/374 | Proportional |

| | | | | | |
|----------|------|-----|---------------|---------------|----------------------|
| Germany | 1995 | 16 | 28.9 | 557/1930 | Mixed |
| Austria | 1994 | 9 | 19.6 | 88/448 | Proportional |
| Spain | 1995 | 17 | 19.58 | 231/1180 | Proportional |
| Belgium | 1995 | 5 | 17.6 | 69/393 | Proportional |
| France | 1992 | 21 | 12.1 | 203/1671 | Proportional |
| Italy | 1995 | 20 | 11.4 | 125/1092 | Proportional |
| Portugal | 1992 | 2 * | 9.2 | 10/108 | Proportional |
| Ireland | 1994 | - | 7.7 | 17/220 | Not elected directly |
| Greece | 1992 | 13 | not available | not available | Not elected directly |

Figures compiled from Red Europea de Expertas (1996:4), Panorama (1994:25-28), Instituto de la Mujer (1997)

* In Portugal, the only two autonomous regions correspond to the archipelago, i.e. Madeira and the Açores. There is no autonomous regions on the mainland.

Table 14: Number of Women in Regional Assemblies of the European Union



Figures taken from Table 13: "Participation of Women in the Regional Assemblies of the E.U. 15 and their Electoral Systems."

In Ireland, eight Regional Authorities were established in 1994, comprising of **local county** and **city councillors nominated by their constituent local authorities**. In Greece, regional councils are made up of a **general secretary**, the **nomarchies** (sub-regional assemblies), one representative from each local union of **municipalities** and **communes**, and one from each **regional association**.

The slightly **higher level of women at a regional level** across the European Union in general may be partly explained through the **dominant use** of a **proportional electoral system**. The largest increase between these two levels of political representation is in **France**, where the number of **national parliamentarians is 6.4%, compared to a regional level of 12.1%**. The **Regional Council** is elected by **proportional representation**; this is very different to the **majoritarian electoral system that exists for national elections**, and is similar to the local system in municipalities of more than 3500 inhabitants (otherwise a majoritarian system is used). **This difference in electoral systems may be seen as an important factor in the far higher level of female political representation at a regional level.**

Quotas and Affirmative Action at a Regional level

No legislative quota exists for regional elections, apart from **Belgium**, where the electoral law of 1994 stipulates that no sex shall fill more than **2/3 of a party list**. However, many **parties apply their own quotas** for regional elections:

- **Sweden** The FP systematically includes at least one woman in a winnable position on a closed list; the SAP, FP, VP, MpG and KDS use the "zipper system" (alternating between male and female candidates)
- **Denmark** The KAD (a women's trade union) actively promotes its members as candidates; the Social Democrats, Liberals, Conservatives and Social Liberals have equal opportunity committees; the Socialist People's Party and the Social Democrats have a quota system for office-holders
- **Germany** B90/Greens have a quota of 50%; SPD has quota of 33.3% in proportional elections; CSU informally allocates women in prominent places on the electoral list (in proportional elections)
- **France** The Socialist Party has an internal rule to present 30% female candidates in regional elections
- **Austria** ÖVP systematically includes at least one woman in a winnable position on a closed party list, and gives women priority in the allocation of electoral remainders

The "**zipper system**" is very popular in **Sweden**, with most political parties having an **informal agreement** to use it. Such an approach to party lists and the **importance of the position that women are placed within these lists**, explains why Sweden has the highest levels of female parliamentarians at both national and regional level. This reinforces the conclusion that **quotas alone are not sufficient to ensure high levels of female political representation: Belgium**, the **only country with a legislative quota** has a **lower number of women elected at a regional level** than Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Austria and Spain, who do not have such a quota system.

8. Female political representation at a local level

Comparisons made at a local level are more accurate as **all member states have some form of local representation**. Interestingly, the level of female political representation at a **local level** within the E.U. (**20% of the total**) **is lower** than at a **regional level** (24.9%) and **just lower than at a national level** (20.53%).

Table 15 shows the level of female political representation at a local level and each member state's corresponding electoral system. Whereas **Sweden** again has the **highest number of women at local political level** (41.3%), followed by the other Nordic countries of Finland (30%) and Denmark (27.9%), the **largest differences between national and local levels** is in the **United Kingdom** and **France**. In the **United Kingdom, 25% of local councillors are women** (compared to 9.5% at a national level), while in **France, 21.2%** of those elected at a **local level are women** (compared to 6.3% nationally).

The large increase in these figures for the UK and France can be partly explained by two different factors: **the role of political parties** and **the role of electoral systems**. In the **United Kingdom**, the **influence of political parties decreases at a local level**, with far more independent candidates standing (and being elected) at a local level rather than at national level. **Fewer resources** are needed to stand for local elections, and campaigning is done within a far smaller scale, involving local issues. By **not having to participate in a party selection process**, female candidates **avoid many of the problems** associated with this in a majoritarian electoral system (for example, the criteria of long political service or the image of an "ideal" male candidate). Moreover, women represented at a local level find it **easier to combine their elective duties and family life**.

In **France, municipal election systems vary with the size of the population of the municipality** (this also occurs in **Luxembourg**). In municipalities with **less than 2500 inhabitants**, councillors are elected with a **majority vote** in two rounds of voting, with **independent candidates allowed to stand**. For municipalities with **2500 to 3500 inhabitants**, the same electoral system exists, but **independent candidates cannot stand**. Those municipalities with a population **greater than 3500 people** (except Paris, Lyon and Marseilles) use a **proportional** voting system in two rounds, with **closed lists**. **Paris, Lyon and Marseilles** have specific electoral systems where there is **both a city council and a municipal council per district (arrondissement)**, which are elected using a **proportional system**. Overall, a greater number of candidates in France are elected using the **proportional system**, suggesting that this is a **strong contributory factor in the far higher level of female political representation** at a **local** (21.2%) and **regional** (12.1%) level than at a national one (6.4%). It might also be suggested again that it is easier for women to **combine their elective duties** at a local level and those of **family**, due to a greater **flexibility of meeting times**, etc.

Table 15

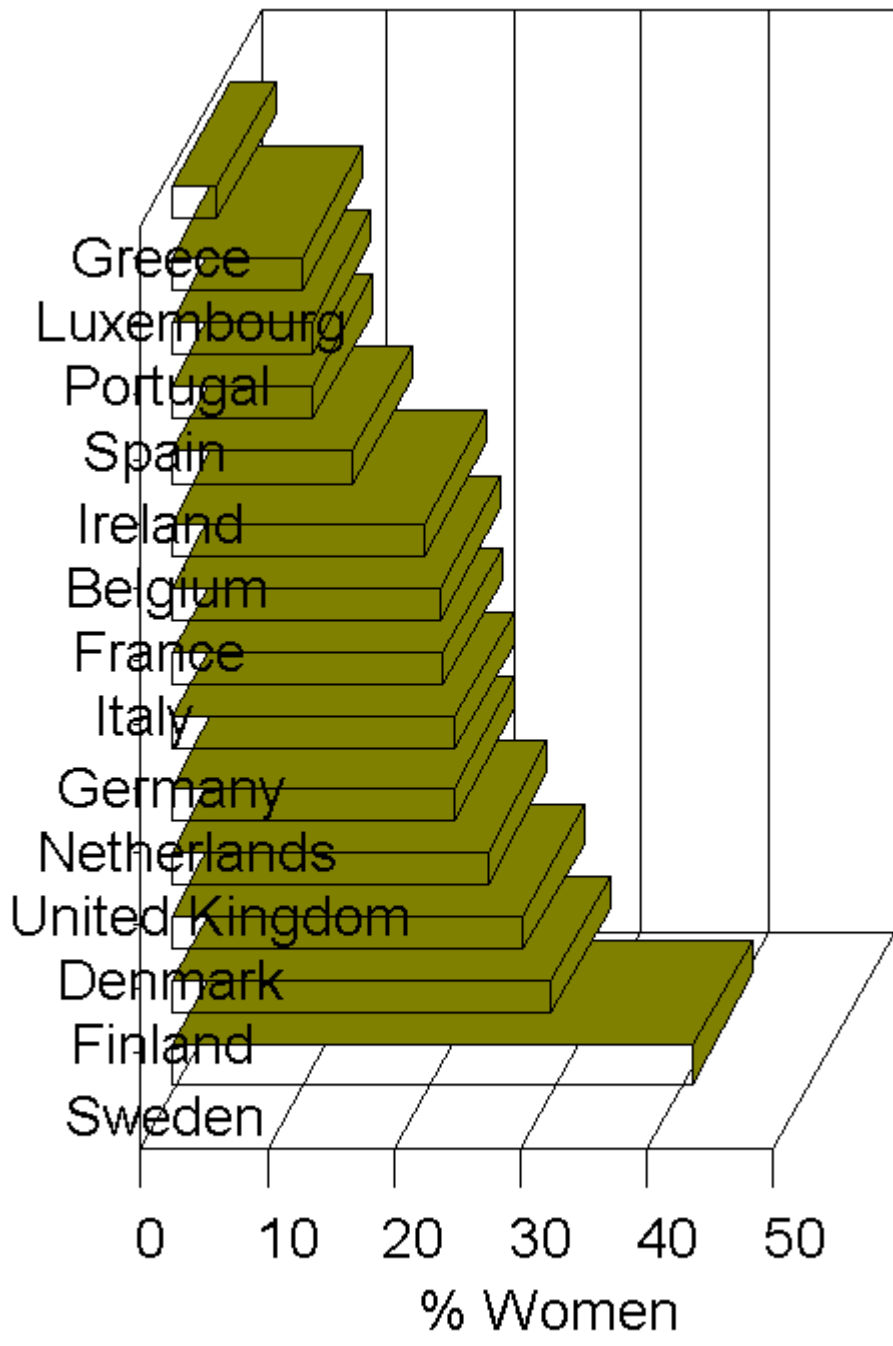
| <i>Participation of Women in Local Assemblies in the E.U. 15 and their Electoral System</i> | | | | |
|---|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>Country</i> | <i>Last Elections</i> | <i>Number of Women/ Total Seats</i> | <i>% Women elected</i> | <i>Electoral System</i> |
| Sweden | 1994 | not known | 41.3 | Proportional |

| | | | | |
|----------------|------|---------------|-----------|---|
| Finland | 1992 | 3776/12567 | 30.0 | Proportional |
| Denmark | 1993 | 1311/4704 | 27.9 | Proportional |
| United Kingdom | 1993 | not known | 25 * | Majoritarian |
| Netherlands | 1994 | 2475/11072 | 22.4 | Proportional |
| Germany | 1993 | 6494/29016 ** | 22.4 | Mixed |
| Italy | 1995 | 4903/22763 | 21.5 | Majoritarian |
| France | 1995 | 107979/508732 | 21.2 | Proportional (more than 3500 inhab.), Majoritarian (less than 3500 inhab.) *** |
| Belgium | 1994 | 2357/11728 | 20.1 | Proportional |
| Ireland | 1994 | not known | 14.3 | Proportional |
| Spain | 1991 | 7338/65709 | 11.2 | Proportional |
| Portugal | 1993 | 757/6797 | 11.1 | Proportional |
| Luxembourg | 1993 | 114/1105 | 10.3 | Proportional (more than 3000 inhab.) Majoritarian (less than 3000 inhab.) |
| Greece | 1994 | 1871/51942 | 3.6 | Proportional |
| Austria | 1994 | not known | not known | Proportional |

Figures compiled from Panorama (1994) and Red Europea de Expertas (1996:5)

* Estimated figure; **These figures based on a survey; ***Except Paris, Lyon & Marseilles

Table 16: Number of Women in Local Assemblies in the European Union



Figures are taken from Table 15: "Participation of Women in Local Assemblies in the E.U. 15 and their electoral system."

The **higher local figures** for those countries with a low level of female political representation at a national level is a **positive indication of future female national representation**; many national candidates have previously started their political career in local assemblies.

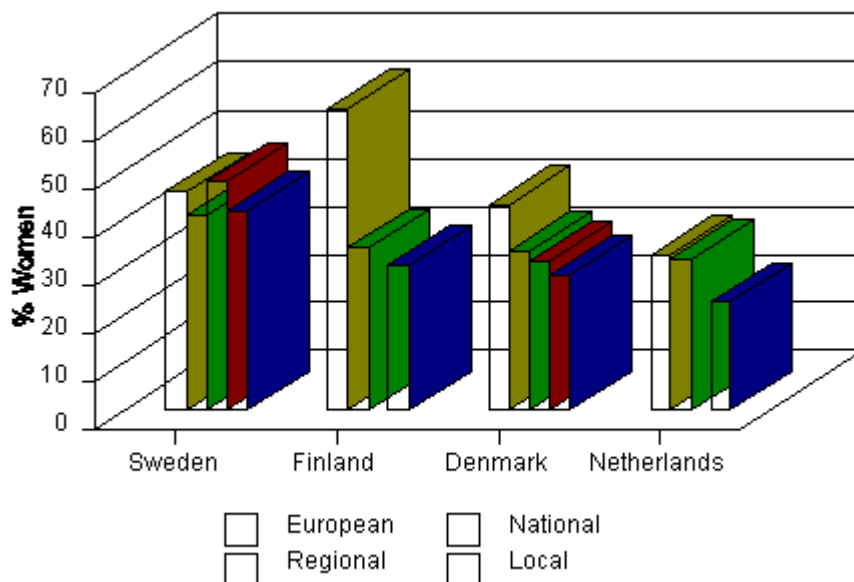
Quotas and Affirmative Action at a Local level

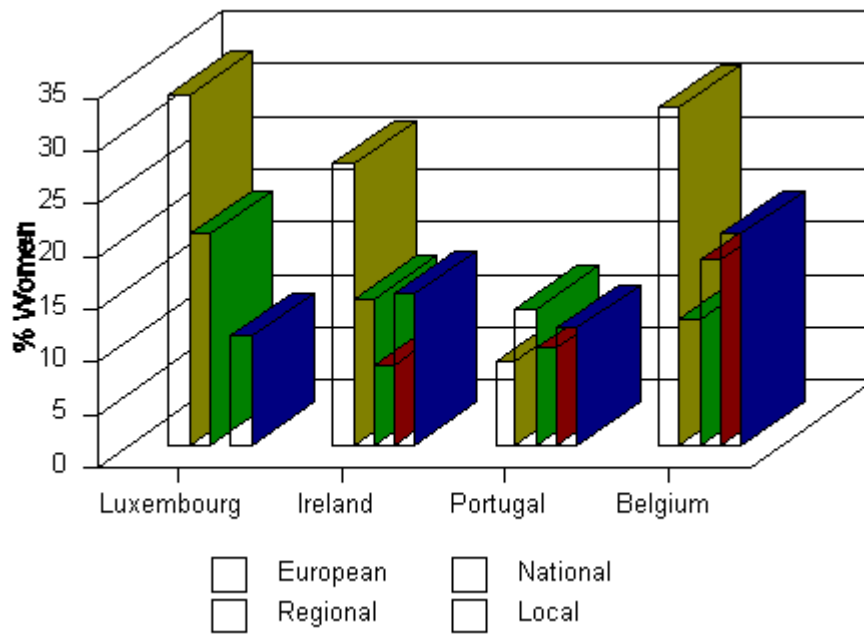
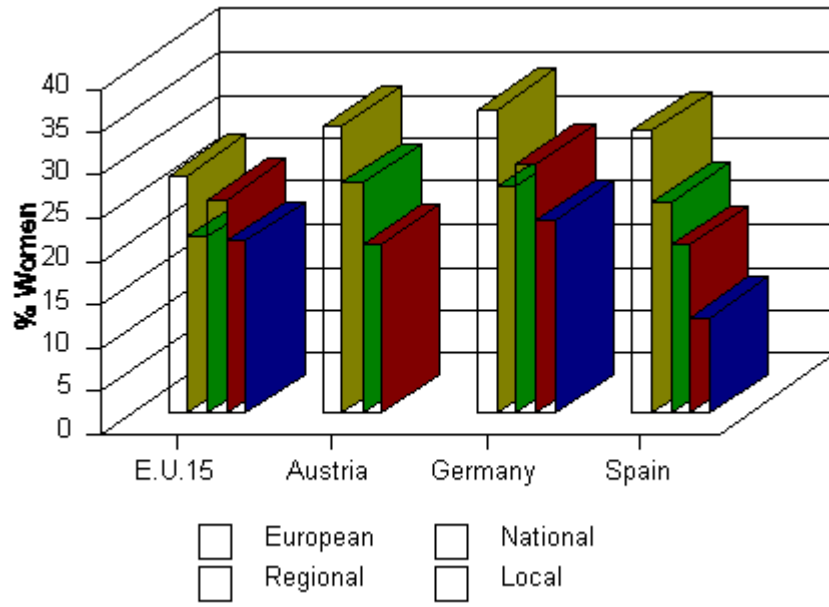
The only country with a **legislative quota** is **Belgium**. On a party level, the following countries have taken action at a local level:

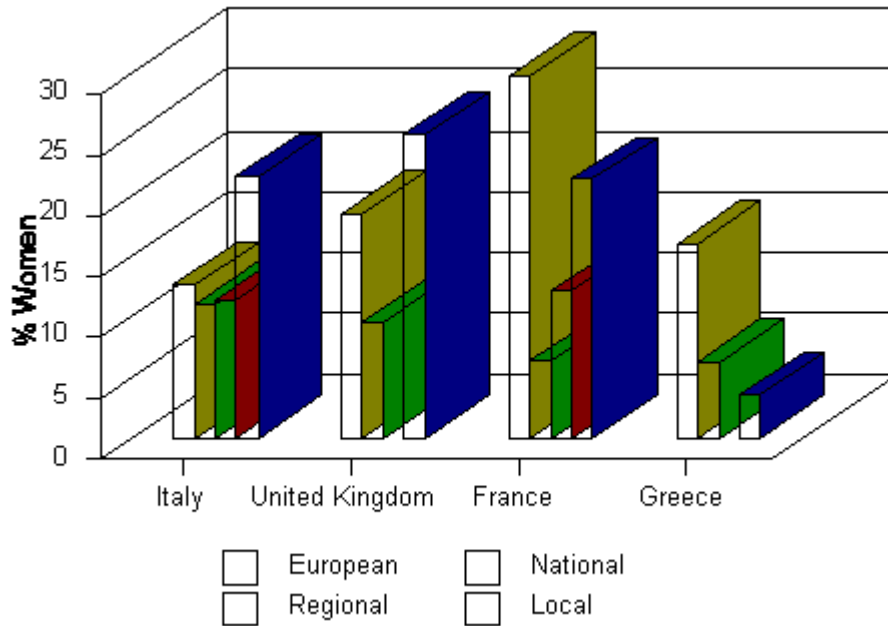
- **Sweden:** Informal quota practices, especially the "zipper system" among most parties (SAP, FP, VP, MpG and KDS)
- **Denmark:** Socialist People's Party and the Social Democrats have a quota system for local office holders
- **France:** The Socialist Party has an internal rule for presenting at least 30% women in all elections based on proportional system
- **Ireland:** Democratic Left and the Workers' Party have informal 40% quota; the Green Party operates a 1/3 to 1/2 quota system; the Labour Party has a 25% quota system
- **Austria:** ÖVP includes at least one woman in a winnable position on a closed list, and gives women priority in the allocation of electoral remainders
- **Germany:** CSU uses informal agreement to place women in prominent places on party lists; B90/Greens use "zipper system" in proportional elections
- **Netherlands:** PvdA (Labour Party) uses an informal quota of 33%

9. Analysis

Female Political Representation: A Comparison of E.U. Member States







Analysis (Continued): Female Political Representation: A Comparison of E.U. Member States

General Analysis:

- At a European level, female political representation is consistently higher than at any other level (national, regional or local) with the exception of Portugal, reaching above parity in Finland.
- At a national level, the highest level of female political representation is in Sweden, and the lowest level is in Greece. There appears to be no direct correlation between the level of women at a national level and at a regional and local level.
- At a regional level, female political representation is often higher than at a national level (except Denmark, Austria, Spain and Ireland).
- At a local level, female political representation is generally lower than at an either national or regional level (except in Sweden, Ireland, Portugal, Belgium, Italy, the United Kingdom and France). Three of the countries with the lowest level of female political representation at a national level have far higher levels of women elected to local assemblies (Italy, the United Kingdom and France).

Country Analysis:

- **Sweden:** Has the highest proportion of women elected to any national, regional and local assembly within the European Union. The highest level of female political representation in Sweden is at a regional level, and the lowest is at a national level.
- **Finland:** Has the highest proportion of women elected to the European Parliament (62.5%), and the second highest level of women at a national and local level within the European Union. No regional assembly exists. The

- highest level of female political representation in Finland is at a European level, and the lowest is at a local level.
- **Denmark:** Has the third highest proportion of women elected to the European Parliament, national legislature and local assembly within the European Union, and the second highest proportion of women at a regional level. The highest level of female political representation in Denmark is at a European level, and the lowest is at a local level.
 - **Netherlands:** Has similar proportions of women at a European and national level (32.26% and 31.3% respectively), with a lower proportion of women at a local level (22.4%). No regional assembly exists.
 - **Austria:** A third of all European parliamentarians are women, but the proportion of women at a national and regional level declines to 26.8% and 19.6% respectively. There are no figures for the proportion of women at a local level.
 - **Germany:** Has over 35% female European parliamentarians, but this figure drops to 28.9% at a regional level, and 26.2% at a national level. The lowest level of female political representation in Germany is at a local level, where the proportion of women is 22.4%.
 - **Spain:** Has nearly a third of its European parliamentarians as women, but the proportion of women subsequently decreases at a national (24.6%), regional (19.58%) and local level (11.2%).
 - **Luxembourg:** At a European level, one third of Luxembourg's parliamentarians are women, but this figure decreases at a national level (20%) and further at a local level (10.3%). No regional assembly exists.
 - **Ireland:** Has just over a quarter female parliamentarians at a European level, but fewer women at a local level (14.3%) and a national level (13.9%). In regional assemblies, the proportion of women drops to 7.7%.
 - **Portugal:** Has the lowest proportion of women at a European level (8%), and the second lowest at a regional level (9.2%) within the European Union. At a local level, the figure goes up to 11.1%, and is highest in the national legislature with 13%.
 - **Italy:** In local assemblies, over a fifth of representatives are women, but this decreases to a fairly constant level at a European (12.64%), regional (11.4%) and national (11.1%) level.
 - **United Kingdom:** in the United Kingdom, the highest level of female political representation is at a local level with 25%. At a European level, the proportion of women drops to 18.39%, and at a national level this halves to 9.5%. No regional assembly exists.
 - **France:** has just under 30% female European parliamentarians, but this figure drops to 21.2% at a local level, 12.1% at a regional level, and 6.4% at a national level. France has the second lowest proportion of women in a national legislature within the European Union.
 - **Greece:** has the lowest proportion of women at a national and local level within the European Union (6.3% and 3.6% respectively). The figure for female representation at a European level is far higher at 16%. Figures for women at a regional level are not available.

10. Conclusion

The role of **electoral systems** is very **important** in determining the **level of female political representation** in the European Union (and indeed on a world scale). It is not without coincidence that the member states with the **highest** levels of women parliamentarians (Sweden, Finland, Denmark and the Netherlands) all have **proportional** electoral systems, and that those countries with the **lowest** levels (Italy, the United Kingdom, France and Greece) have either **weakened proportional** or **majoritarian** systems.

Across Europe, **20.53%** of parliamentarians at a **national** level are women; at a **regional** level this increases to **24.9%**, while at a **local** level it decreases to **20%**. The higher levels of women at a regional level may be partly explained through the **dominant use of the proportional electoral system**, shown most clearly in the example of **France**, which has 12.1% women at a regional level (when using a **proportional** system) compared to 6.4% at a national level (**majoritarian** system).

At a local level, there is a slightly **lower** level of female representation than at a national level. However, the United Kingdom, a country with a low level of female representation at a national level, has a far higher level of local female representation; this may be seen as partly due to factors outside electoral systems (ie role of parties).

Despite the importance of electoral systems, it cannot be the sole factor in deciding the level of female political representation. **Sweden**, the country with the **highest level** of women at a **national, regional and local level**, has a long established system of **unofficial quotas** in place at a **party level**, most noticeably those **affecting the placement of women on party electoral lists**. The wide use of the **"zipper system"** (alternating women and men on the party lists) in Sweden is vital in securing high levels of female political representation. This can be shown by the examples of other countries (such as Belgium) where the existence of a **quota** has been **ineffective** unless it ensures women have **winnable places** on party lists. Therefore, the **attitude** and **determination** of the **political parties** themselves are important. It goes without saying that using this type of quota or electoral practice is only possible with a **proportional** electoral system.

Interestingly, the overall **highest level of female political representation** is within the **European Parliament**, with **27.64%** of M.E.P.s being women. While this is nowhere near parity, it is a hopeful sign of increasing female political representation across the European Union

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12. Appendix

WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE: Chronology of the Legal Recognition of Women's Rights to Vote and Stand for Election in the European Union

| Year | Country | Right(s) Obtained |
|------|----------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1906 | Finland | To vote and to stand for election |
| 1915 | Denmark | To vote and to stand for election |
| 1917 | Netherlands | To stand for election |
| 1918 | Austria | To vote and to stand for election |
| | Germany | To vote and to stand for election |
| | Ireland | To vote and to stand for election * |
| | United Kingdom | To vote and to stand for election * |
| 1919 | Belgium | To vote * |
| | Luxembourg | To vote and to stand for election |
| | Netherlands | To vote |
| | Sweden | To vote and to stand for election * |
| 1921 | Belgium | To stand for election * |
| | Sweden | To vote and to stand for election ** |
| 1928 | Ireland | To vote and to stand for election ** |
| | United Kingdom | To vote and to stand for election ** |
| 1931 | Portugal | To vote and to stand for election * |

| | | |
|------|----------|--------------------------------------|
| | Spain | To vote and to stand for election |
| 1934 | Portugal | To vote and to stand for election * |
| 1944 | France | To vote and to stand for election |
| 1945 | Italy | To vote and to stand for election |
| 1948 | Belgium | To vote and to stand for election ** |
| 1952 | Greece | To vote and to stand for election |
| 1976 | Portugal | To vote and to stand for election ** |

* Legal Right subject to conditions or restrictions

** Restrictions or conditions lifted

Figures taken from Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1997:28

European Parliament: March 1997