**A Man’s World? The Descriptive Representation of Women inside Europarties**

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**Abstract**

Men are over-represented in the majority of national political parties. This article makes a significant contribution to the analysis of women’s representation inside ‘Europarties’ that operate at the European level. It draws on new data, including interviews with Europarties’ representatives. We focus on women’s representation in party leadership positions, including *Spitzenkandidat:innen*. We show that more women have become part of Europarties’ leaderships in recent years, but that overall, men remain over-represented, especially in right-wing parties. We explain this development by focusing on the role of gender quotas and women’s organisations in enhancing women’s representation. Whereas gender quotas have increased women’s presence in leadership bodies, women’s organisations have not. Drawing on Feminist Institutionalism, we also analyse some of the informal norms and practices that have (dis)empowered women. We argue that without statutory gender quotas for governing bodies, as well as formal and transparent decision-making processes, women risk being excluded from leadership positions.

Keywords: Europarties, women’s descriptive representation, gender quotas, women’s organisations, Feminist Institutionalism.

**1. Introduction**

Researchers have highlighted the important role played by national political parties in promoting or hindering women’s access to public office (Kunovich and Paxton, 2005; Fortin-Rittberger and Rittberger, 2015). Political parties are responsible for recruiting candidates for public office, and - once they get elected - promoting them to leadership positions. Parties have therefore been described as ‘crucial gatekeepers to elected office’ (Pruysers et al., 2017, p. 210). Existing research has highlighted the gender imbalance inside national political parties from the grassroots to the top (Scarrow and Gezgor, 2010; Ponce et al., 2020). Meanwhile, the representation of women in European Union (EU) party politics has only lately attracted more scholarly attention. We know that the number of women elected to the European Parliament has steadily grown over the years (Abels, 2021) but that most political leadership posts inside the European Parliament (EP) have been held by men (Kantola and Miller, 2022; Dingler and Fortin-Rittberger, 2022; Ahrens and Rolandsen Agustín, 2019, pp. 6-7).

Yet the EP is not the only relevant arena of EU party activity. There also exist extra-parliamentary European political parties, or ‘Europarties’, and this study is the first to analyse women’s representation inside them. Descriptive representation, following Hanna Pitkin’s (1967) well-known typology of representation, refers to a notion of correspondence between the characteristics of the representative and the represented, sometimes also referred to as ‘statistical’ representation. To be sure, political representation is a very complex subject, and Pitkin also considered formalistic, symbolic, and substantive representation, arguing that they should best be understood together. Yet, as this is the first research on women’s leadership and Europarties, we decided to focus on women’s descriptive representation.

Women’s party leadership matters for two principal reasons. First, at least in some instances, women have been more proactive in advancing women’s issues - be they progressive or conservative - than their male counterparts (Kittilson, 2011; Mushaben, 2022). Second, women’s party leadership – if it is done in a good and inclusive manner – also holds symbolic importance (Lombardo and Meier, 2018). A Europarty with a gender-balanced leadership could symbolise a step towards party modernisation. Yet when it comes to Europarties and women’s leadership, there is much we don’t know. It is even more interesting as existing EU regulations do not contain strong binding obligations for Europarties to represent women.

We analyse the descriptive representation of women in elected positions inside the governing bodies, as well as the *Spitzenkandidat:innen*, of the ten currently registered Europarties, covering the spectrum from the far left to the far right, the old and the new. Our research is guided by two broad questions:

1. To what extent have women been represented inside the Europarties’ leadership over time?
2. What are the formal and informal rules and practices that explain the levels of women’s descriptive representation inside the Europarties’ leadership over time?

To describe women’s representation in the party leadership, we have collected new data through documentary analysis and e-mail exchanges with Europarty officials (see appendix: ‘Composition Governing Bodies of Europarties’). To explain women’s representation, we examine the role played by gender quotas, women’s organisations, and informal norms and practices, based on eight interviews with Europarty representatives.

The following section provides a short overview of Europarties’ institutional development. This is followed by section 3 which introduces two expectations, charts women’s descriptive representation inside Europarties’ leadership bodies since the early 2000s and discusses gender quotas and women’s organisations’ roles. Section 4 introduces Feminist Institutionalism and analyses informal party practices and norms. Ultimately, we argue that without statutory gender quotas for governing bodies, as well as formal and transparent decision-making processes, women risk being excluded from party leadership positions. In section 5, we conclude the article by reflecting on our findings and presenting future research opportunities.

**2. Europarties: a path towards regulation and (limited) empowerment**

In 2023, there were ten Europarties officially registered with the EU’s Authority for European Political Parties and Foundations (APFF). Yet, Europarties are relatively unknown, even amongst the activists of their national member parties (Raunio, 2022). The oldest and most established Europarties were founded in the run-up to the first direct European elections of 1979, such as the Party of European Socialists (PES), the European People’s Party (EPP), and the Alliance of Liberal and Democratic Parties for Europe (ALDE). At that time, Europarties were loose umbrella organisations of national parties. Over time, they have become more ‘institutionalised’ (Bressanelli, 2014; Külahci and Lightfoot, 2014). The Treaty of Maastricht (1992) gave them ‘constitutional’ recognition: they were expected to ‘contribute to forming political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union’.

In order to fulfil such high aspirations, Europarties have been given EU funding since 2004, which provided an impetus for their organisational development (Johansson and Raunio, 2005). Since then, significant amounts of EU subsidies – almost €700 million between 2004 and 2022 – have allowed Europarties to gain more autonomy from their EP political groups, professionalise their organisations, and employ more staff and resources (Wolfs, 2022, pp. 248-254). There are strict regulations on the use of these grants and on the Europarties’ internal organisation and activities.

However, the existing regulations do not contain strong provisions on women’s representation. When in 2014 the regulations were revised, the large EP political groups wanted to oblige Europarties to include provisions in their statutes promoting gender balance in the general assembly and governing bodies, but these provisions were dropped during the trialogue negotiations with the Council.[[1]](#footnote-1) In 2018, it was only added that ‘[t]he inclusion of information on gender balance in relation to each of the member parties of the European political party should be encouraged’,[[2]](#footnote-2) however without specific provisions. During the 2021-2023 negotiations the European Commission re-introduced the obligation for Europarties to have internal rules on gender balance and for their national member parties to publish information on the gender of their candidates and elected MEPs (Bressanelli, 2022, pp. 47-48). These provisions have not (yet) been challenged by the EP or the Council of Ministers, but at the time of writing, the negotiations were stuck. For the period under analysis in this article, Europarties were free to determine the composition of their governing bodies, hence our interest in discovering the paths different Europarties have taken.

Europarties fulfil some important functions. They bring together the elites of national parties, both at the ‘working’ level (e.g., through working groups) and the ‘political’ level, by organising ‘pre-summits’ for their affiliated heads of state and government to facilitate and coordinate positions at European Council summits (Johansson, 2017). Europarties also have an (even if only nascent) electoral function: many launch common European election manifestoes. Importantly, since 2014, Europarties have also selected ‘*Spitzenkandidat:innen*’ or lead candidate(s) aspiring to become the President of the European Commission (Day, 2014; Put et al., 2016; Wolfs et al., 2021) although they are rarely mentioned by national parties in their campaigns (Hertner, 2018). In the run-up to the EU enlargements, the large Europarties also invested in democracy promotion and partisan linkage by socialising national elites and incorporating them into the European party system (Bressanelli, 2014; Chryssogelos, 2017).

Thus, Europarties have become more institutionalised, but they don’t have strong grassroots, as their individual membership schemes, where they exist, are very basic, often because national parties fear competition from Europarty activists (Hertner, 2019). This matters because national member party representatives have voting rights at Europarty congresses and in other party bodies. They are thereby involved in all key decisions, including policymaking, changing the party statutes, and leadership selection – all of which are relevant when it comes to women’s representation. Importantly, national parties select candidates for EP elections. Europarties have no influence over the selection, and therefore cannot impose gender quotas. Whether Europarties are ‘real’ parties remains contested. We agree with Johansson and Raunio (2019) who describe Europarties as ‘networks of like-minded national parties or loose federations of member parties, especially when compared with the often centralised and strongly disciplined parties found in member states.’ This means that Europarties have limited autonomy, as any key decisions need to be approved by their member parties.

**3.** **Descriptive representation of women inside Europarty leaderships**

Our empirical analysis is guided by two expectations. These are primarily informed by research on women’s representation inside national parties. As mentioned above, national party representatives are involved in all important Europarty decisions. We would therefore expect them to want to ‘upload’ some of their national party’s institutional preferences, practices, and norms to Europarties (Mastenbroek and Kaeding, 2006).

Our first expectation relates to the role played by party ideology for promoting or hindering gender balance inside Europarty leaderships. At the national level, left-wing, far-left, as well as liberal parties select more woman candidates for public office and have more female members of parliament than right-wing and far-right parties (Pruysers at al., 2017). This variation is mainly due to the increasingly effective implementation of statutory gender quotas (Paxton and Hughes, 2015), but also informal rules (targets, recommendations) and feminist social norms inside parties. We therefore expect party ideology to play an important role in enhancing or hindering women’s descriptive representation inside Europarties. More specifically, we expect left-wing Europarty leadership bodies to be more gender-representative than their right-wing counterparts, primarily due to gender quotas and feminist norms.

Our second expectation refers to the role played by women’s organisations acting as springboards for women into Europarty leadership positions. Many national parties, particularly the established mainstream parties, have set up women’s organisations, although they vary in their status, powers, and institutionalisation. However, Childs and Kittilson (2016) could not establish a direct relationship between the existence of a women’s organisation and higher numbers of women inside parties’ national executive bodies. Drawing on this finding, we do not expect that Europarties with women’s organisations - even those with their own statutory powers and budget - necessarily have a higher share of women inside their governing bodies*.*

We collected data on the *organisational* and *electoral* leadership of the ten officially registered Europarties. First, the *organisational* leadership comprises the governing bodies of Europarties. Some Europarties have more centralised leadership structures that concentrate around a single president, secretary general, and their deputies (ALDE, EPP, PES) while others are ruled in a more collective manner through an elected bureau (EL) or have co-chairs and a bureau (EGP). We include elected and appointed leadership positions, leaving out ex-officio members of governing bodies (such as the EP political group leaders) as Europarties are not involved in their election. For the same reason, we exclude national party delegates who are appointed by their parties to attend Europarty executive groups. Still, in cases where Europarties have introduced gender quotas for national party delegates to attend Europarty congresses or other forums, we mention these. Included in our analysis are therefore: Europarty president(s), vice-president(s), treasurer(s), secretary-general(s) and their deputies, and bureau members (where applicable). Graph 1 (below) illustrates this data. Second, for the *electoral* leadership, we include the *Spitzenkandidat:innen* for the 2014 and 2019 European elections

Our analysis is based on a triangulation of information from Europarty documents (party statutes, rules of internal order, annual accounts, annual reports, pamphlets, and brochures), websites, correspondence with the Europarties themselves[[3]](#footnote-3), and eight semi-structured interviews (see bibliography). Our data remains somewhat incomplete because the European Conservatives and Reformists Party (ECR) did not respond to our repeated requests for information. Although the data for some of the oldest Europarties goes back to the 1970s, we focus on the past two decades when the old Europarties started becoming more institutionalised, and new Europarties were launched.

**Graph 1: Share of women in elected leadership positions inside Europarties (2000-2022)**

Graph 1 demonstrates that men have been, and continue to be, over-represented inside most Europarty leaderships. However, we found significant differences between and within parties, at present and over time. The most important trend is that today’s left-wing Europarties have a significantly higher percentage of woman leaders than their right-wing counterparts, mirroring the EP’s political groups (Kantola and Miller, 2022, p.166) and national parties (Pruysers et al., 2017). Between left-wing Europarties there is, however, a significant degree of variation. Standing out is the European Green Party (EGP), where over half of the members of the governing bodies have been women since 2010, followed by the far-left Party of the European Left (EL), with women’s representation remaining relatively stable at around 50 per cent. The centre-left Party of European Socialists (PES) experienced two main phases: the number of women in leadership positions was very low before 2011, but their share has since increased to 40 per cent or more. Meanwhile, the patterns for the centre-left regionalist European Free Alliance (EFA) have fluctuated, ranging from 25 per cent of woman leaders in 2014 to over 50 per cent (2019-2022).

Next, it is noticeable that the far-right Identity and Democracy Party (IDP) and the right-wing European Christian Political Movement (ECPM) have had a particularly low number of women (below 20 per cent) in elected leadership positions. This is also the case for the centre-right European People’s Party (EPP), although the number of woman leaders has slightly increased since 2012 to around a quarter. The centrist European Democratic Party (EDP) has a slightly higher number of women in their leadership: between 25 to 30 per cent. The liberal Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) shows a more volatile pattern: the share of women gradually increased up to 70 per cent in 2009 but has sharply declined afterwards to below 25 per cent.

Table 1 (below) lists the *Spitzenkandidat:innen* from 2014 and 2019, including their gender. In 2014, there was only one woman slected as *Spitzenkandidatin*, Ska Skeller, who formed part of the EGP’s leadership duo with José Bové. Again in 2019, the Greens presented a gender-balanced duo, as did the EL. Also, in 2019 ALDE for the first time nominated a ‘Team Europe’ with five out of seven candidates being women. The other Europarties either nominated men or no candidate(s).

**HERE: Table 1: The *Spitzenkandidat:innen* of Europarties for the 2014 and 2019 European Elections**

We note that in the end, the EPP appointed Ursula von der Leyen as their *Spitzenkandidatin* (July 2019). This should not be seen as a feminist act. Rather, it happened because Manfred Weber, the EPP’s officially elected candidate, proved unacceptable to French President Emmanuel Macron, and because the EP failed to rally behind any of the other Europarties’ *Spitzenkandidat:innen* (Abels and Mushaben, 2020). Von der Leyen was therefore the compromise candidate rather than the EPP’s initial (male) preference.

Thus, party ideology matters when it comes to women’s representation, as left-wing Europarties are more gender-balanced than their right-wing counterparts. Our first expectation is thereby confirmed. Below we show that left-wing Europarties are also more likely to have gender quotas than right-wing Europarties, which helps explain why they have more woman leaders. After all, gender quotas are highly effective instruments for improving women’s representation inside national parties, so Europarties, as networks of national parties, should follow a similar logic.

Table 2 (below) shows that only half of the Europarties have implemented gender quotas. They are all left-wing, which is in line with their national member parties (Franceschet et al., 2012).

**HERE: Table 2: Statutory and soft gender quotas (GQ) inside European political parties**

The Europarty with the highest share of women in their leadership, the EGP, has the most comprehensive gender quotas. Article 3.8 of their statutes reads that ‘[The European Green Party] applies the principle of gender-balance in all its elected and appointed bodies and external representation’ (EGP, 2022). Gender quotas have been part of the EGP since the beginning of the 1990s, when its predecessor – the European Federation of Green Parties – was established. In 2017, a 50+ quota was introduced: if a party body consists of an uneven number of people, it must have a majority of non-males (Interview 7). The EGP also applies a strict top-down gender policy, with the (soft) requirement for the members to ‘apply gender balance principles in their party structures’, and the obligation for member party delegations to the Council and Congress to be gender-balanced; a sanction for non-compliance entails the non-reimbursement of costs and a limitation of speaking time (but not voting rights).[[4]](#footnote-4) With regard to the *Spitzenkandidat:innen,* the 2014 selection procedure included a guarantee for women’s (but not men’s) representation, stating that ‘the second contender elected will be […] in case the first contender elected is a man, a woman’ (EGP, 2013, p. 3). In 2019, the EGP strove towards creating ‘a level playing field through equal promotion, representation and support to all contenders throughout the process’ (EGP, 2018, p. 2) and also applied the quota for leadership selections to the *Spitzenkandidat\*innen* (Interview 7).[[5]](#footnote-5)

Meanwhile, the PES has a 50 per cent women’s quota (up from 40 per cent since 2015) in place for national delegates attending the PES Council and Congress,[[6]](#footnote-6) but it does not apply to elected PES leadership positions. The PES has never had a woman president, secretary-general, or contender to become *Spitzenkandidat:in*. The PES did not include gender quotas in the selection procedure for the *Spitzenkandidat:in*. It emphasised in its internal rules that the party ‘promote[d] gender equality and the candidacy of women at all high-level positions in EU official bodies’ (PES, 2011, p. 2; 2018, p. 2) but has not followed up on this commitment. A PES official stated that ‘for us, having a feminist leader is more important than having a woman for the sake of having a woman’ (Interview 8).

By contrast, the EL has gender quotas in place for almost all of its leadership posts: the (vice-)presidents of the Europarty are elected on a ‘gender quota basis’; the member party representatives on the Executive Board – which is responsible for the daily work of the Europarty – have to be gender-balanced, and the delegations of the member parties to the EL’s Congress must count at least 50 per cent women.[[7]](#footnote-7) The EL also has what it calls a ‘soft’ gender quota for the political secretariat which is the collective ‘CEO, being tasked with the daily management of the Party’ (EL, 2018). Importantly, the EL also selected a gender-balanced duo of *Spitzenkandidat:innen* for the first time in 2019. Still, the party has never elected a woman for president.

The outlier amongst left-wing Europarties is the EFA, which has no gender quotas but has increased its share of woman leaders significantly since 2016. The incumbent president, Lorena Lopez de Lacalle, who was elected in 2019, has been a ‘critical actor’ in feminising the party. Under her leadership, the EFA also committed to presenting a gender-balanced duo of *Spitzenkandidat:innen* for the 2024 EP elections (EFA, 2023).

The right-wing Europarties do not have statutory gender quotas for their governing bodies. The EPP included the provision in its statutes in 2011 that the Europarty ‘strives towards equal participation of women and men in all its organs’.[[8]](#footnote-8) It was formulated as an aspiration and not as a binding rule, because in the latter case it would not have been possible to obtain the support of the majority of member parties (Interview 3). However, the fact that EPP has never elected a woman as president, secretary-general, or *Spitzenkandidat:in* shows that its target hasn’t been met.

Meanwhile, ALDE (except for an informal objective to have a gender-balanced team of *Spitzenkandidat:innen* for the 2019 European elections), ECR, EDP, ECPM, ECRP, and IDP don’t have gender quotas. These Europarties and most of their member parties tend to oppose gender quotas and elect fewer women into public office than left-wing parties (Interviews 1, 5, 6; Lühiste and Kenny, 2016). An interesting case is the increasingly far-right ECR party, which was initially led by men, but elected Giorgia Meloni as its first female president in September 2020. Still, the ECR’s other leaders are men, and the party has not introduced gender quotas– just like its political group in the EP, which is dominated by men (Gaweda et al., 2023).

Overall, we found that the two left-wing Europarties with the most comprehensive gender quotas, the EGP and EL, have represented women better than the others. While the example of the EFA would suggest that better women’s representation can also be achieved without gender quotas, under a new party leader this situation could easily reverse, as the case of ALDE shows.

Next, we turn our attention to women’s organisations. We expected to find, in line with Childs and Kittilson’s (2016) study of national parties, that the presence of a women’s organisation does not automatically lead to a higher number of women in Europarty leadership bodies. We draw on six factors identified by Childs and Kittilson that can help us analyse the role of women’s organisations inside Europarties: whether these organisations are: (1) officially constituted as part of the party’s constitution/rules; (2) funded by the party, with their budget protected in the party constitution, including paid personnel; (3) entitled to have policy-making powers, with these rights being enshrined in the party constitution; (4) autonomous, in the sense that they are a creature of women party members and elected by them; (5) equal in their status, powers and resources to other internal party identity groups, such as youth or LGBTQ+ groups, and fully integrated into the party’s policy and other decision-making bodies (6) accountable, in the sense that they have an (elected) executive with term limits, and that they organise frequent meetings. Women’s organisations that meet all these indicators would be labelled ‘good’ party member women’s organisations (Childs and Kittilson, 2016, p. 606). Table 3 (below) highlights the status of Europarties’ women’s organisations.

**HERE: Table 3: Women’s organisations inside Europarties**

Table 3 shows that only three out of ten Europarties (EPP, EFA, PES) have a women’s organisation and that their powers, resources, and status vary. The most institutionalised is ‘PES Women’ which was launched in 1992 (PES, 2014) and should count as ‘good’. PES Women has its own president, four deputy presidents, bureau, staff, an annual budget, and formal decision-making powers. Yet inside PES governing bodies, women have always been under-represented, and PES Women has not been a springboard for women to party leadership positions. What comes to mind here is Childs and Kittilson’s (2016, p. 601) observation that parties’ women’s organisations could potentially ‘keep women from the true centres of power and decision-making within parties; women’s issues may here be perceived as special or separate from the party platform.’ In a similar fashion, EPP Women was established in 1981, modelled on the women’s organisation of the German member party (CDU). It has since become an official member association of the party with representational and voting rights in most party bodies. However, EPP Women has not been able to achieve statutory gender quotas, mainly because of the resistance of the member parties from the ‘old’ member states (Interviews 2, 3). The centre left EFA launched a Women’s Forum in 2020 under the leadership of Lorena Lopez de Lacalle who described it ‘as a new space for reflection and discussion, and to organise new ways to move forward from words to deeds on the issue of gender equality’ (EFA, 2020). Yet whether the woman’s forum will lobby for (and achieve) gender quotas is not yet clear. The EGP, as the most gender-equal of all Europarties, merely has a ‘Gender Network’ with only limited funding that is also open to men. This has been a deliberate choice: the Europarty favoured mainstreaming gender equality issues across the entire Europarty instead of concentrating the issue in the hands of a single group (Interview 7). The European Left has a ‘Feminist Working Group’ but it lacks status and resources, and it appears to suffer from weak attendance and visibility within the party (EL, 2022, p. 20). ALDE does not have a women’s organisation either but has run the Women’s Academy (2016-2020) and the Alliance of Her (since 2021) to promote the election of women at the European, national, and regional levels. These programmes focused on providing training and networking opportunities for liberal women with political ambitions but are not officially constituted within ALDE. There is also no attempt to set up a permanent women’s organisation because this could be used as a pretext not to take more action to improve women's representation (Interviews 1, 4).

Amongst the right-wing and far-right Europarties, only the ECR launched a women’s forum (in 2018), but it was soon disbanded.

Thus, even the presence of ‘good’ women’s organisations such as PES Women and EPP Women, does not necessarily lead to more women inside the party leadership. Our second expectation was therefore met. Yet these two women’s organisations have lobbied for women-friendly changes in rules and practices. For example, PES Women successfully campaigned for the introduction (and later increase) of statutory gender quotas for the national delegates attending the PES Council and Congress (PES, 2014). PES Women have also called for the PES leadership to nominate a woman as *Spitzenkandidatin* or a gender-balanced *Spitzenkandidat\*innen* duo for the 2024 EP elections (Interview 8). The chairwoman of EPP Women, Doris Pack, tried several times to bring the limited representation of women in the EPP leadership bodies to the attention of the Presidency and Board Members (EPP, 2022a; EPP, 2022b). This matters, even if (statutory) gender quotas were rejected. Which other rules or dynamics might be at play that can help us understand the over-representation of men inside Europarties? Parties tend to be informal organisations. In the following, we briefly introduce Feminist Institutionalism and its focus on formal and informal institutional rules.

**4. Feminist Institutionalism and informal, gendered Europarty practices**

Feminist institutionalism (FI) is concerned with the ‘rules of the game’ inside political institutions (MacRae and Weiner, 2021). It makes four specific contributions to institutional theory (Thomson, 2018). First, FI assumes that all institutions are gendered. It can thereby help us understand how the outputs of institutions, the relationships between institutions and actors, and the experiences of men and women within these institutions, are gendered (Chappell, 2010, p. 183). Second, FI also allows for a gendered understanding of the ways in which formal and informal politics interact. FI scholars argue that a ‘gendered logic of appropriateness’ exists within institutions, and that this ‘logic’ guides actor behaviour (Chappell, 2006; 2014, p. 184). In this respect, FI theorists argue that understanding the informal must form a key part of the analysis of the gendered nature of institutions. It is known that party politics inside the EP are highly informal (Chryssogelos 2022, p. 454). We expect this to also apply to Europarties, and without understanding the informality, we cannot appreciate their gendered nature. Third, FI provides a greater understanding of how old institutions have changed to become more gender-progressive, and how some of the more recently created political institutions have incorporated gender concerns more easily and fundamentally at the outset (Mackay and Waylen, 2014). Some studies also elucidate why certain institutions resist implementing more women-friendly practices (Thomson, 2018; Chappell, 2014). Informal institutional practices often exclude women and thereby prevent progressive gendered change (Waylen, 2014). Fourth, FI places an understanding of power at its core (Kenny and Mackay, 2009). Gendered dynamics thereby shape decision-making and access to power within institutions, as ‘the power relations that sustain political processes are produced and reproduced through gender’ (Mackay et al., 2010, p. 583). Existing research highlights how political parties operate on the basis of gendered norms and customs which hinder women’s political careers even in situations where formal institutions allow for and enable their participation (Kantola, 2019; Lovenduski and Norris,1993).

In our interviews with Europarty representatives, we were able to tease out some of the informal gendered power dynamics that have shaped some of the Europarties’ practices.

For a start, we observed that decision-making within Europarties is dominated by member parties, and that this has an impact on women’s representation. It matters whether member parties are shaped by feminist norms, because they constitute the main *selectorate* of Europarty leaders. For example, gender-equal representation isn’t a salient topic amongst member parties of the right-wing and far-right ECPM and IDP (Interviews 5, 6) which partly explains the low share of woman leaders. In the IDP, full member parties are allocated a seat in the leadership body, and they alone decide who they nominate (Interview 6). Similarly, the main obstacle for the representation of women in the EPP leadership seems to be the nomination phase: candidates are put forward by the national member parties, and only some put forward women (Interview 3). Meanwhile, statutory gender quotas only seem to exist in those Europarties where member parties agree on the importance of gender-equal representation. In the EGP for example, gender quotas have been part of the organisation since its origins, and it has never been a controversial issue among the member parties, since gender equality is at the core of the green ideology (Interview 7). Meanwhile, whereas ALDE had a high percentage of women in its leadership bodies in the past, gender quotas never materialised because it is considered a sensitive and divisive issue among the member parties. The high share of women in ALDE leadership bodies between 2006-2012 was due to a combination of the strong influence of the Scandinavian member parties, who, based on their national culture of guaranteed women's representation, stressed the importance of this issue within ALDE and asked then chairwoman Annemie Neyts to encourage member parties to send gender-balanced delegations to the ALDE Congress (Interviews 1, 4). When Neyts’ term as president ended in 2012, the percentage of women inside the ALDE leadership declined sharply.

Next, the presence or absence of feminist norms also determines the room for manoeuvre of critical actors within Europarties. In the EGP, it was the (gender-balanced) leadership itself that pushed for stronger gender quotas at all levels of the Europarty, including the national member parties, and almost all members approved of these proposals (Interview 7). However,

when feminist norms don’t prevail, Europarty actors have less room for manoeuvre to implement women-friendly changes. For instance, inside the EPP, women’s representation was put on the agenda in 2011 by the President of EPP Women, Doris Pack. She publicly confronted the party leadership over the lack of women’s representation. However, because there was no consensus among the member parties on gender quotas, statutory changes were limited to the inclusion of the (mere) aspiration to ‘[strive] towards equal participation of women and men in all its organs’ (Interview 2). Furthermore, an important reason why the ALDE is not advocating the introduction of statutory quotas is because it is a divisive issue among member parties. Whilst ALDE’s women’s programme attempts to raise awareness of gender equality through training and advocacy, it does not translate into guaranteed representation in the Europarty’s leadership bodies, but instead informally supports women that are part of their network to run for a leadership position to challenge the status quo and get women’s issues on the political agenda (Interview 1). Finally, EPP Women now focus on the European Parliament’s gender-equality-related activities and the national member parties and their women’s organisations, because there is a lack of consensus within the Europarty on quotas and other gender-related issues (Interviews 2, 4).

There exist other factors that have hindered the nomination and election of woman Europarty leaders. Like in many other institutions, there is a strong element of path-dependency inside Europarties. The turnover rate of leaders in some Europarties is very low, and incumbent leaders often have an advantage over new candidates. Many of the incumbent leaders are men. Bjarnegård (2013) has demonstrated how informal networks operate inside parties across the world to protect those already in power. People selected into these networks often possess ‘homosocial capital’: they already have access to power and resources, and they are perceived to be like others in the network. It is often men who work together to preserve their privileged status.

What’s more, in some right-wing Europarties, geographical balance within leadership bodies is considered more important than gender balance: it seems to be more important that the Europarty leadership is composed of representatives from different regions or countries in Europe, rather than of an equal number of men and women. For example, in the leadership bodies of the IDP and ECPM, full member parties are given a seat to preserve geographical balance, and the parties themselves determine who is nominated for the seat (Interviews 5, 6). Similarly, in composing the leadership of the EPP, the balanced representation of member parties from different countries is considered important, and the member parties decide whether to put forward men or women (Interviews 2, 4).

Third, as women work and are (still) expected to do most of the care work, they often lack time to engage in Europarty politics, which is often added on to national party activism. For example, a representative of a national party’s women’s organisation asked if PES Women meetings could be held on weekends because she had no time for meetings during the week (Interview 8).

**5. Conclusions**

Our article is the first to investigate women’s leadership inside Europarties. We collected new data to demonstrate that overall, Europarties continue to overrepresent men in their leaderships. Still, we found that left-wing Europarties have become better over time at representing women than their right-wing counterparts, although there is significant variation between them. In general, the further to the right a Europarty is, the fewer women it has in leadership positions, and the ‘man’s world’ is still intact. Thus, party ideology clearly matters for the descriptive representation of women inside Europarties. But how? We showed that statutory gender quotas, where they exist, have led to gender-balanced party leaderships (EGP, EL) or have at least increased women’s presence over time (PES). Only left-wing Europarties (and not all of them) have implemented statutory gender quotas, highlighting that a progressive, feminist ideology still matters – like it does for national parties.

We also examined women’s organisations and their potential to act as springboards for women into Europarty leadership bodies. We found, in line with research on national parties, that the only two Europarties with ‘good’ women’s organisations - the PES and EPP - have so far not catapulted women into top leadership positions. Perhaps they have even kept women out of the parties’ decision-making circles. However, their women’s organisations have pushed women’s representation onto the parties’ agenda by advocating gender quotas for the organisational and electoral leadership of their parties.

We have also contributed to feminist institutionalist research by demonstrating how informal gendered norms and practices inside Europarties work in practice and continue to put women at a disadvantage. Europarties, as networks of like-minded national parties or loose federations of member parties, rely on their member parties’ norms and preferences when it comes to women’s representation. When feminist national parties have coincided with feminist Europarty leaders, gender-progressive changes have been implemented. However, without statutory gender quotas, such changes were not permanent. In some Europarties (ALDE, EPP) the member parties have been the driving force against the introduction of gender quotas. If this opposition is met with Europarty leaders’ indifference, gender quotas are unlikely to be introduced. Yet we argue that without statutory gender quotas, long-term, sustainable, equal representation of women inside Europarties’ leaderships is not guaranteed.

We have also demonstrated that path-dependency matters, and that leadership turnover can be slow, meaning that within most right-wing and far-right Europarties, men have stayed in power, operating within male-dominated formal and informal networks. For women to enter the leadership, these Europarties and their member parties would need to decide to promote women and follow it through, and the most effective way would be statutory gender quotas. We therefore argue that open, transparent, and rule-based practices are key to women’s equal representation inside Europarty leaderships.

Our findings about Europarties’ gendered practices, both formal and informal, contribute to the observations that feminist researchers have made about national parties. We have demonstrated that in most cases, national member parties dominate Europarties’ decision-making processes and seek to ‘upload’ their norms and practices to the European level. In many ways, Europarties are the sum of their national member parties’ gendered norms and practices. Future research could investigate the substantive representation of women – that is, to what extent, and how, women’s issues are represented by Europarties in their manifestoes, pamphlets, and other policy documents. As the Europarty spectrum spans from the far left to the far right, we would expect to find a large degree of variation.

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Interview 4, Annemie Neyts (ALDE), Brussels, 23 September 2022.

Interview 5, Maarten van de Fliert (ECPM), phone interview, 7 October 2022.

Interview 6, Gerolf Annemans (IDP), Brussels, 26 October 2023.

Interview 7, Biljana Lalic (EGP), online interview, 22 November 2023.

Interview 8, Party Official, ‘PES Women’, online interview, 11 December 2023.

1. Working Document for the Informal Political Trilogue on 25 February 2014, p. 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Recital 6 of Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2018/673. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. We emailed our excel sheets with the names, genders, and nationalities of party leaderships and *Spitzenkandidat:innen* to all Europarties asking them to check, fill in gaps, and provide additional relevant information. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Articles 6.3.6.4. and 6.5.2. of the EGP Statutes (as amended at the 35th EGP Council in Riga on 5 June 2022), and Articles 23 and Annex P of the EGP Rule Book. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For the *Spitzenkandidat\*innen* process of 2024, the EGP has changed its rules again with the provision that the duo should consist of at least one woman. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. If there is more than a difference of one delegate between the two genders, the votes of the delegations are reduced proportionally, see Articles 22.4. and 30.3. of the PES Statutes (as adopted by the 11th PES Congress on 7 December 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. EL (2018): Articles 16, 20 and 27 of the Statutes of the European Left, as approved by the General Assembly in Brussels on 30 September 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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