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Gender parity in politics: evening-up the score?

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On 21 October 1946, 5.6% of MPs in France's National Assembly were women. The figure was still only 6.1% after the 1993 parliamentary elections. This puts France next-to-bottom of the EU league for women's representation in parliament. Only Greece has managed to do worse. At the same date, the Northern European countries had achieved or bettered the critical mass of 30% of women MPs.

France had not moved on in nearly half a century, then. Attacks by a range of women's groups, feminist groups, women trade union and party political activists, not to mention "ordinary women voters", with demands for a quota system gave way in the early 90s to the more radical agenda of parity. This idea was launched by a 1992 book *Au pouvoir citoyennes: liberté, égalité, parité* (Editions Seuil) written by Françoise Gaspard, Claude Servan-Schreiber and Anne Gall, which called for parity to be written into law in the following terms: "Elected bodies at local, regional and national level shall comprise equal numbers of women and men".

The parity principle was to make rapid headway despite fierce opposition from left and right alike, including some feminists (1). Grassroots groups swung into action, while the Left and the Greens jumped on the bandwagon. The 1997 dissolution brought matters to a head when women managed to raise their share of seats in the new National Assembly to just 11% (the socialist party having decided to put up women-only lists in 28% of its constituencies).

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◆ The 1999 revision: a world first

In his general policy address to the National Assembly on 19 June 1997, the newly-appointed Prime Minister, Lionel Jospin, pledged that the Constitution would be revised to enshrine the aim of gender parity. The pledge was kept on 28 June 1999: article 3 of the Constitution now provides that "equal access by women and men to elective office and positions shall be promoted by statute", while article 4 says that the parties "shall contribute to the implementation of the principle set out in the last paragraph of article 3 as provided by statute".

After much debate, Act No. 2000-493 came onto the statute book on 6 June 2000 (published in the Official Journal of 7 June). It provides for alternating parity for single round elections like those to the European Parliament, and Senate elections by proportional representation (PR), and parity in blocks of six (2) in double ballot majority elections, like local (municipalities of over 3,500 people) and regional elections. In parliamentary elections, parties must field 50% of women candidates or face financial penalties (3). Only elections in cantons, first-past-the-post elections to the Senate, and local elections in municipalities of under

(1) On this timeline and the power plays involved, cf. Janine Mossuz-Lavau, *Femmes/Hommes. Pour la parité*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 1998.

(2) The top 6 candidates on the list must include 3 women, with the same applying to each block of 6 down to the bottom of the list.

(3) These relate to the "first fraction" of public funding, which is by reference to the number of candidates.

3,500 people now fall outside the Act, therefore.

This provision is a world first — in no other country are political parties required to put up equal numbers of women and men candidates for the majority of elections. Countries that had been thinking of compulsory measures — like India, Belgium, Argentina and Brazil — have never gone further than quotas of 33% at best.

The Act was applied twice in 2001, for local elections and Senate elections by PR. What were the outcomes? And did it have a knock-on effect on the non-Act elections being held at the same time (4)?

◆ Women make up a third of local councils

After the second round of the 2001 local elections, the Ministry of the Interior found that in municipalities of over 3,500 people — the only ones subject to the parity of candidates requirement — 47% of local councillors were women with little variation by size of municipality. The proportion of women councillors in municipalities of under 3,500 people was much lower at 30%. Overall, then, only 33% of local councillors are women (table 1). But there was a knock-on effect in small municipalities not subject to the Act's requirements, where women had held only 21% of local council seats in 1995 (figure 1).

◆ A reluctant march towards parity

Did this spill-over effect also extend to bodies outside the scope of the Act? Anything but: local executives

and county (department) councils remained very much male strongholds.

So, the number of women mayors has risen by very little: Ministry of the Interior figures suggest they are up from 5% to 7% in municipalities of over 3,500 people, and from 8% to 11% in those of under 3,500 people. There may be relatively more women mayors of small municipalities than ones subject to the Parity Act, but they also have a not-insignificant share of large towns and cities. For example, 9% of towns of over 30,000 people have a woman mayor, compared to 6% of municipalities of between 3,500 and 9,000 people. Today, 11% of all mayors throughout Metropolitan France are women, compared to 7% in 1995. Also, we have no figures for the proportion of women deputy mayors. Paris may in some respects have led the way by appointing a woman first deputy mayor, but it is not known how far other towns in France have followed suit.

The political right has done a little more than the left (apart from the Communist Party) to get women into mayoral posts. In descending order, women accounted for 9.5% of communist mayors, 7.2% UDF (Union pour la démocratie française), 6.7% other Right, 6.4% RPR, 5.9% (PS) Socialist Party, and 5.5% other Left. The PS, the supposed spearhead of parity, drew the line at applying the rule which was compulsory for local councils to its local executives.

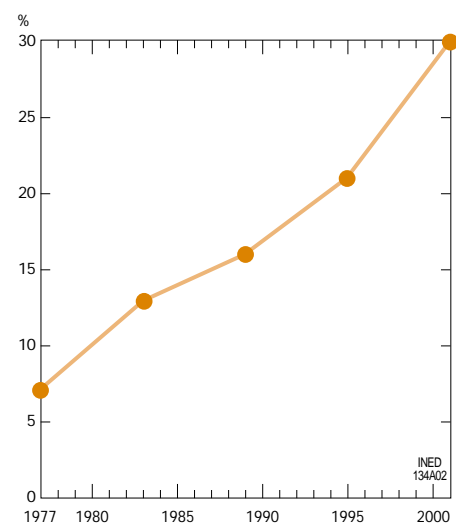
Whatever else, these elections show the effectiveness of mandatory measures, because where they do not apply, there is virtually no improvement in female representation. Cantonal elections were held at the

Table 1 - Numbers and share of women local councillors by size of municipality, after the 2001 elections

	Number of women elected as local councillors	% of women among local councillors
Municipalities of under 3,500 people	118,321	30.0
Municipalities of over 3,500 people	38,072	47.5
<i>Of which:</i>		
Municipalities of 3,500 to 8,999 people	21,558	47.4
Municipalities of 9,000 to 29,999 people	11,073	47.3
Municipalities of over 30,000 people	5,441	48.0
Total	156,393	33.0

Source: Ministry of the Interior.

Figure 1 - Women among all local councillors in municipalities of under 3,500 people since 1977 (%)



Source: Ministry of the Interior.

Table 2 - Women executives of revenue-raising statutory joint local authority bodies (EPCI) in 2001 by size of population concerned (%)

	Under 5,000	5,000 10,000	10,000 15,000	15,000 20,000	20,000 50,000	50,000 100,000	100,000 200,000	Over 200,000	Total
Total number of EPCIs	694	583	262	138	184	79	36	25	2,001
% with woman chair (a)	6.1	5.7	4.6	2.2	6.5	5.1	2.8	4.0	5.4
% with woman executive manager	56.1	49.9	39.3	33.3	20.1	8.9	13.9	4.0	43.9

(a) Proportion after the elections following the 2001 local elections.

Source: figures taken from an unpublished note written by Christophe Noyé for the Assembly of District Associations of France (ADCF).

same time as the local elections. In those cantons where councils were up for re-election (half the total), 9.8% of the county councillors were women against 8.3% at the 1998 polls. The Socialist Party had planned to field women candidates only in 30% of cantons, but finally managed only 28% (the same proportion as the constituencies in the 1997 parliamentary elections). Another example, taken from a research study by the Languedoc-Roussillon Women's Assembly, shows that between 1998 and 2001, the number of women county councillors in the region's five departments rose from 9 to 10 (out of 186 councillors) — i.e., one woman more in three years. At that rate, it would take 250 years to achieve parity in the region's county councils...

Women are also drastically under-represented in other non-Act bodies like the statutory joint local authority bodies (EPCI). France has 2,001 revenue-raising EPCIs, but only 108 are chaired by women (5%), and there is little difference by size of population covered by these district agencies (6% for those covering under 5,000 people, 4% for those of over 200,000 people, with a minimum of 2% for those covering 15,000 to 20,000 people) (table 2). Here again, therefore, there is no spill-over effect.

There is a marked improvement when it comes to the executive management of these district bodies, where 44% of all posts are held by women. But the probability of finding a woman in the post varies widely by the size of the population concerned — from 56% of women executives of bodies covering fewer than 5,000 people, to just 20% for bodies covering between 20,000 and 50,000 people, dropping to a paltry

4% in those covering more than 200,000 people. In other words, women are readily appointed to executive management posts in small bodies which involve general administration and secretarial tasks, but hit a glass ceiling in larger bodies where the post carries wider responsibilities and real political clout.

◆ A stately pace in the senate

In the Senate elections held on 23 September 2001, a third of the seats were up for renewal. Two changes influenced these elections: the Act of 10 July 2000 brought in PR voting for electoral districts electing 3 or 4 senators (as opposed to 5 previously), while the Act of 6 June 2000 made alternating parity obligatory for these list systems. Only departments using the first-past-the-post system were not affected by the Act.

The proportion of women candidates varied by voting system. Departments using PR voting had 45% of women candidates against 21% in the others. In the former, women counted for a particularly high proportion of other left (54%), other right (55%), Communists (52%) and Greens (52%). They made up 40% of the socialist lists, but a significantly lower proportion of right wing party lists (34% for the UDF, 31% RPR and 27% Liberal Party). It also has to be said that many outgoing senators sought to secure re-election by standing on independent lists to get around the law. Knowing that a third place listing behind a male leading candidate with a woman necessarily second on the list left them little hope of being elected, they put together their own lists with themselves as leading candidate.

The new system for departments with PR voting had no spill-over effect on those using the first-past-the-post system, including in parties on the left. The CP, for example, which put up 50% of women candi-

(4) My thanks to Réjane Senac-Slawinski, Secretary-General of the Parity Monitoring Centre for sight of the figures supplied to the Centre by the Ministry of the Interior and other bodies.

dates in Act departments fielded only 28% in non-Act ones, while the PS managed a mere 18%.

The resulting figures, then, come as no surprise. Of the 74 seats to be filled in departments with PR voting, the number of women senators rose from 5 to 20. Of the 28 seats in the other departments, women now hold 2 ... compared to 2 before. Overall, however, women have increased their Senate representation slightly: from 19 before 23 September 2001 (out of 321 seats: 6%), there are now 34 women senators (11%). The upper chamber is progressing towards parity, but in its own time.

◆ And the next general elections?

Nominations for the legislative elections are far from all being settled, and some parties are further on than others. The figures cited here are those submitted by the parties to the Parity Monitoring Centre up to December 2001 in reply to requests for status reports on the past and forthcoming elections. All complied apart from the National Front which refused, so the only information available for the moment is that reported by the newspaper, *Le Monde*.

Four parties — the Communist Party, the Greens, the Revolutionary Communist League and Force Ouvrière — planned to observe strict gender parity in selecting their candidates for the next legislative elections. *Le Monde* of 25-26 November 2001 reported that 200 of the 400 candidates so far selected by the National Front were women.

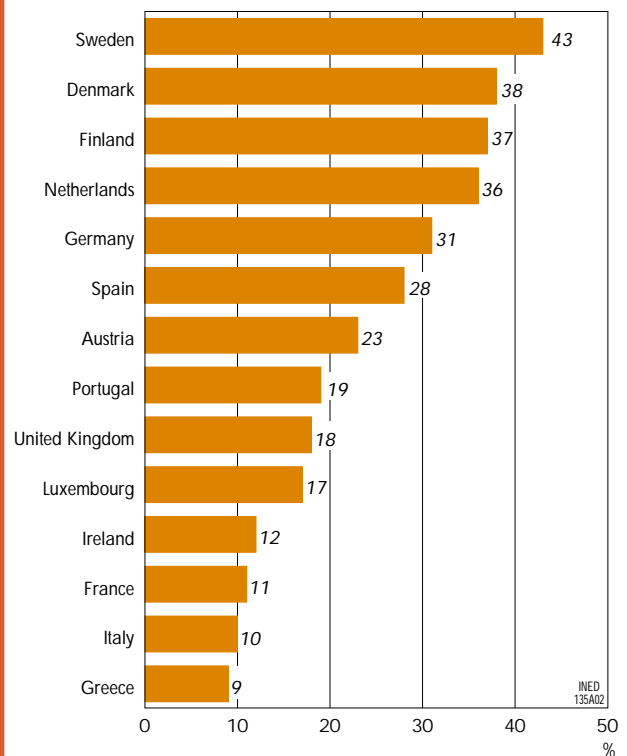
A second group is comprised of the PS-PRG and RPR. The PS and PRG are putting up women only in 40% of their constituencies (equalling 210 candidates) while in ten other non-reserved constituencies, women will be put forward if selected by the votes of party activists. The RPR's avowed aim is 40%.

Then there are parties aiming to field 30% to 35% of women. The UDF is aiming for 35%, but negotiations between its constituent parties mean that the jury is still out. The RPF would like to have a third of women candidates, but is hard-pressed to find them, so that for the moment, only 60 of the 250 listed candidates (24%) are women. The MNR, which has nominated 30% of women candidates, can be classed in the same category.

The other parties, like the Liberal Party and Jean-Pierre Chevènement's MDC, will almost certainly have fewer than 30% of women candidates, but as the MDC is also faced with ensuring parity on two fronts — gender parity and MDC/republican wing (allies) parity — the latter is likely to get the more immediate priority.

What remains to be seen, when all the nominations

Figure 2 - Women in the Lower House or single chamber of EU countries in March 2002 (%)



Source: Inter-parliamentary Association and Parity Monitoring Centre.

are in, is what level of financial penalties the political parties will be prepared to bear not to fall in with the statutory minimum 50% of female candidates, and which of them will have yielded to the temptation to put their women candidates up for unwinnable seats so as to achieve the required figure without “sacrificing” too many of the outgoing male members.

The fact that women MPs make up 43% of Sweden's single chamber parliament, 38% of Denmark's, 31% of Germany's Bundestag, 28% of the Spanish Cortes, and 18% of the United Kingdom's House of Commons (figure 2), shows how far France is lagging and what it must do to catch up (but at what rate?) to most of the other European democracies. French political parties have long failed to follow the lead given by parties in neighbouring countries, which understood that men could not keep an indefinite monopoly on elective office while women make do with being represented, when in France they make up 53% of the electorate, 46% of the labour force, and today outnumber men in higher education.

The June 2002 parliamentary elections should make up some of this lost ground, but it is too soon to say whether they will achieve what can be regarded as “critical mass”, i.e., 30% of women in the National Assembly.