3. Change from the Inside Out: Women in Party Leadership

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Change from the Inside Out: Women in Party Leadership

Organizations invariably serve to guarantee, perpetuate, or increase the social power of those who control them, e.g., the elites that guide them.

—*Angelo Panebianco (1988, xii)*

While some segments of the women's movement have eschewed participation in male-dominated mainstream political institutions, others have viewed political parties as centers of power. Women have been active within the parties of Western Europe for many years, especially since the suffrage movement, and in many instances since the party's inception. Yet with the heightened emphasis on equality born from the New Left social movements, during the 1970s women moved toward party politics and began to intensify their organized demands for equality in the decision-making processes of the party (Randall, 1987; Kaplan, 1992; Lovenduski and Norris, 1993; Lovenduski and Randall, 1993). In many parties, women began to rise to powerful positions within the party hierarchy.

Women's power in top decision-making bodies appears to improve women's opportunities in the national legislature. Previous research found a consistent relationship between women in the top party bodies and women in the party's delegation to parliament across industrialized democracies (Caul, 1999).[1] As women gain power within the party, they also acquire greater

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opportunities and resources to pressure for further parliamentary representation. Therefore, lobbying efforts from within the top party ranks may be a *mechanism* for increasing women's representation in the national legislature.

This chapter aims to uncover the opportunity structures that facilitated women's progress in the party organizations of ten Western European nations. I describe the patterns of women's presence in top-level positions and identify the common characteristics of parties with higher numbers of women in the leadership. I then test several sets of influence in a multivariate model.

Women in Top Party Positions across Western Europe

For women, gaining power within the highest echelons of the party organization has been a difficult and sometimes tumultuous process. In some parties, moving into the party leadership, an arena long dominated by entrenched interests represented by men, has in some respects been more difficult than getting "women-friendly" legislation onto the party platform. As other research suggests, it may be easier for parties to incorporate new issues than to fundamentally reorganize the power distribution within the party organization (Rohrschneider, 1993). Demands for positions of power threaten the established interests, and as such may present more obstacles.

This section systematically analyzes women's patterns of representation on the national executive committees (NECs) of fifty Western European parties. As an important decision-making body within parties, the national executive committee represents a center of power, and thus a central aim for women with political aspirations, or a desire to affect party policy. In some parties, officially there are higher ranking bodies. For example, among the Finnish parties the highest ranking body is the party congress. Yet the party congress meets only annually, and it is a large and unwieldy body. The intention of selecting the NEC for analysis is to pinpoint the highest decision-making body with day-to-day decision-making powers and a manageable number of members.

The proportion of women on the NEC is important because if a "critical mass," or sizable number from an underrepresented group, enters into a political institution, that underrepresented group may gain enough power to further its gains (Dahlerup, 1988; for a review of the literature see Studlar and McAllister, 2002). Studlar and McAllister (2002) find that "critical mass," in terms of a numerical threshold in parliament, has little impact on future parliamentary gains. Yet where women with the power to affect candidate nominations can advocate for other women, gains are likely. Women with power inside the party can gain the ear of the other party leaders, and they can even press to institutionalize their gains through some type of gender rules, such as quotas.

Figure 3.1 Average Percentage of Women on Party NECs, 1975–1997
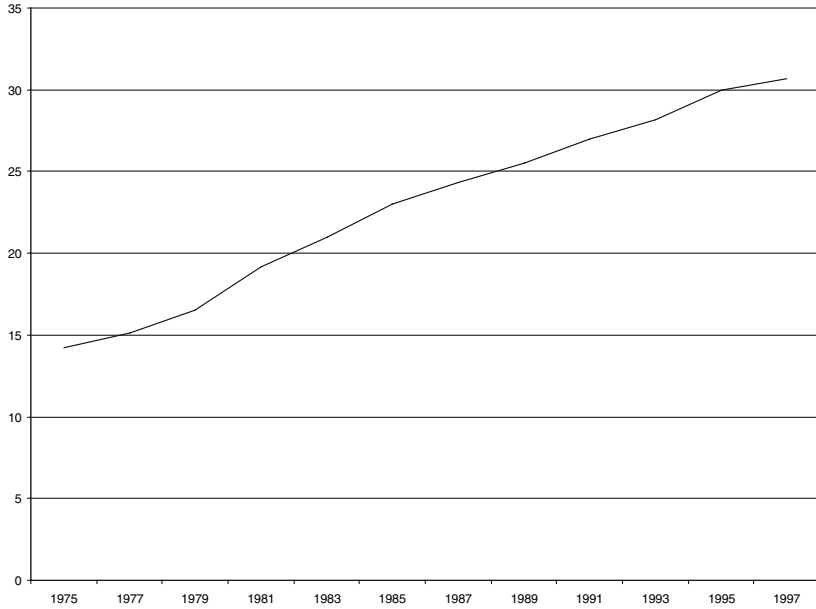
Women's presence on the national executive committees of parties has been growing across Western Europe. Figure 3.1 displays the aggregate percentage of women on the NECs of the parties in this study from 1975 to 1997. The graph reveals a steady climb in women's progress, in an almost linear fashion. In 1975 women composed about 15% of the NECs, on average, and over the next twenty years that average doubled, culminating in women making up about 30% of the NECs in these parties.

Yet below the surface of this aggregated figure, there is a great degree of variation in women in top decision-making bodies at the party level. Table 3.1 displays the percentage of women on the national executive committees in 1975 and 1997 for the fifty parties in this book, as well as the percentage point difference between these two time points.

With a few exceptions, the percentage of women grew in each party. Only in Denmark's Progress Party did the percentage of women fall by a few percentage points. The percentage of women on NECs climbed to nearly 50% in a number of countries. For example, for three parties in Norway the number climbed to 50%, and for three others it climbed into the 40% level, while the Norwegian Progress Party remained stable. Similar substantial gains were made in the Netherlands and Germany, where parties such as the Dutch Pacifist Socialist Party climbed by thirty-five percentage points.

Table 3.1 Women on Parties' NECs, 1975 and 1997

Party Name	% Women on NECs, 1975	% Women on NECs, 1997	% Point Change	Time Period	Number of Elections
Austria					
People's Party (OVP)	9	18	+9	1975-95	6
Freedom Party (FPO)	7	14	+7	1975-95	6
Socialist Party (SPO)	13	31	+18	1975-95	6
Belgium					
Christian People's (CVP)	13	15	+2	1974-87	6
Flemish Socialist Party (BSP)	6	12	+6	1977-95	7
Franco (Socialist) Party (PSB)	N/A	N/A	–	–	–
Liberty (Flemish) (PVV)	N/A	N/A	–	–	–
People's Union (VU)	7	19	+8	1974-95	8
Flemish Greens (AGA)	N/A	N/A	–	–	–
Franco Greens (ECO)	N/A	N/A	–	–	–
Denmark					
Socialist People's (SF)	20	39	+19	1975-94	8
Social Democrats	11	35	+24	1975-94	8
Social Liberals (RV)	21	40	+19	1977-94	7
Christian People's (KRF)	20	40	+20	1981-94	5
Center Democrats	10	17	+7	1975-94	8
Liberal (V)	7	15	+8	1975-94	8
Conservative (KF)	17	30	+13	1977-94	7
Progress Party (KRP)	17	14	-3	1975-94	8
Finland					
People's Democratic (SKDL)	13	27	+14	1975-95	6
Social Democratic (SPD)	8	33	+25	1975-95	6
Center Party (KESK)	13	20	+7	1975-95	6
Swedish People's (SFP)	14	52	+38	1973-95	6
National Coalition (KOK)	18	22	+4	1975-95	6
Germany					
Social Democratic (SPD)	14	47	+33	1972-94	7
Christian Democratic (CDU)	3	33	+30	1972-94	7
Christian Social Union (CSU)	4	26	+22	1972-94	7
Free Democratic (FDP)	9	19	+10	1972-94	5
Greens (G)	6	56	+50	1980-94	5
Ireland					
Worker's Party (WP)	3	16	+13	1977-89	5
Labour (LAB)	3	26	+23	1973-97	8
Fianna Fail (FF)	6	18	+12	1973-95	7
Fine Gael (FG)	24	24	0	1982-97	5
Progressive Dems (PD)	22	39	+17	1991-97	4

Table 3.1 Women on Parties' NECs, 1975 and 1997 *(continued)*

Party Name	% Women on NECs, 1975	% Women on NECs, 1997	% Point Change	Time Period	Number of Elections
Netherlands					
Communist Party	8	25	+17	1972-94	7
Labour Party (PvdA)	23	38	+15	1972-94	7
Pacifist Socialist (PSP)	5	40	+35	1972-94	7
Christian Democrats (CDA)	19	29	+10	1981-94	5
Democrats '66 (D'66)	14	22	+8	1972-94	7
People's Party (VVD)	19	28	+9	1972-94	7
Norway					
Socialist People's (SV)	47	50	+3	1973-97	7
Labour Party (DNA)	33	50	+17	1973-97	7
Center Party (SP)	36	50	+14	1973-97	7
Christian People's (KRF)	18	40	+22	1973-97	7
Liberals (V)	29	45	16	1973-97	7
Conservatives (H)	0	33	+33	1973-97	7
Progress (FRP) 13	13	13	0	1973-89	5
Sweden					
Communist Party (VPK)	18	52	+34	1973-94	8
Social Dem Worker (S)	11	50	+39	1973-94	8
Center Party (C)	29	43	+14	1973-94	8
People's Party (FP)	29	44	+15	1973-94	8
Right Party (M)	26	39	+13	1973-94	8
UK					
Labour (LAB)	24	48	+24	1974-97	6
Liberal/Liberal Dem (LIB/SDL)	13	N/A	—	1974	—
Conservatives (CON)	17	20	+3	1992-97	2

Source: Katz and Mair (1992) updated with data from Steinenger (2000) for Austria and data from Galligan (1998) for Ireland. Data on Denmark collected by Karina Pedersen, University of Copenhagen. Data from parties' self-reported records (Denmark's Radikale Venstre and Liberals, Norway's Liberal, DNA, Hoyre, and the UK's Conservative and Labour Paraties). In some instances data were unavailable for 1975 or 1997, and in such cases the nearest available data point was substituted as noted in the final two columns of the table.

Examining Party-Level Differences in Women's Leadership

Women's gains on the NEC are more than simply a function of their activism; the level of representation is also shaped by the opportunity structure. Herbert Kitschelt (1994) theorizes that those parties with the structures capable of recognizing new challenges quickly are more likely to respond to new groups. This section examines which party characteristics make a party more likely to recognize and accept women's pressures for greater presence among the party elite.

Party Women's Organization

As an intraparty interest group, the party's women's organization often calls for more of a voice among the higher party ranks. The women's organization channels and organizes women's claims. Further, it provides a visible pool of women for positions in higher party posts. Alternatively, some women might contend that women's organizations isolate and effectively marginalize women within the party structure, keeping them from the avenues of true power. It is important to test whether the presence of a party women's organization is conducive to women's gains in the upper party echelons. One must keep in mind the limitations of this overly simplified dichotomous measure. Ideally, one could also systematically test the strategies, strength, claims, and choice of allies of the women's organizations cross-nationally. Yet no such published comparative measures for party women's organization exist, and it would be disingenuous to create a flawed measure to demonstrate their importance. As such, the dynamic role of the women's organization is probably better captured by the case study chapters in this book.

Party Ideology

A party's ideology may also play an important role in conditioning party responses to the demands of women for positions within the organizational hierarchy. Kitschelt (1994) argues that the ability of a party organization to respond to new demands is constrained by the historical, established ideological orientations of the party. The party's past ideological debates frame the new debates and condition the willingness of the party to listen to new demands.

One might expect leftist parties, rather than rightist parties, to be more open to newcomers such as women for two reasons. First, leftist parties have a tradition of espousing egalitarian ideologies in general, and this trait has carried over into their rhetoric regarding women's representation (Duverger, 1955; Beckwith, 1986; 1992; Matland and Studlar, 1996; Caul, 1999). Rule (1987) argues that rightist parties hold a more traditional view of women's roles in society more generally, and in politics more specifically. Second, historically the women's movement has been linked to leftist parties, and they have proven to be more supportive of feminist issues than parties of the Center or the Right (Jenson, 1982; Katzenstein and Mueller, 1987:6). Yet there have been tensions between the Left and the women's movement, as the Left had long argued that women's lives would be most improved if the party would concentrate on women's material conditions as part of the overall Socialist framework, rather then focusing on women's rights as a group.

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Further, both Lovenduski and Norris (1993) and Matland and Studlar (1996) posit that while a leftist ideology might once have been a strong predictor of a party's likelihood to adopt gender policies, it is no longer as strong. Leftist parties may not be the only parties to have a high number of women among their top officials as support for women spreads across the ideological spectrum of the party system.

Further, the traditional unidimensional Left/Right ideological continuum may be too simple to describe how ideology affects women's representation. The lines of political conflict were once based upon "Old Politics" cleavages of class conflict. Old Left parties are oriented toward the concerns of the working class, and Old Right parties are oriented toward business interests. The rise of a "New Politics" cleavage adds a new dimension to our conceptualization of ideology (Inglehart, 1977). The New Politics dimension involves conflict over a new set of issues, among which are minority rights and gender equality. This new cleavage has spurred new parties, especially New Left parties that have been active proponents of women's issues. The New Left and its parties—such as Green parties—are even more closely linked to the women's movement than are the traditional leftist parties such as Labor and the Social Democrats.

Hence, a *left* party in general may not necessarily favor policies to support women. New Left parties, as representatives of postmaterialist values, may be more amenable to implementing strategies to quickly promote women candidates. Therefore, I test summary measures for both Old Left values and New Left values, developed from scores assigned by party experts (see Appendix A).

Party Structure

Previous literature emphasizes four different components of a party's structure that may impact its ability to change: the degree of centralization, pragmatism, fractionalization, and the presence of formal party rules. Centralization describes the distribution of control over decision making within the party hierarchy. Does a centralized or decentralized party organization better facilitate women's ascendance to the top ranks? Harmel and Janda (1982) state that there are competing theories regarding the role of centralization. On the one hand, a decentralized party organization may provide for greater input from the grass roots, giving women more points of access to enter the party ranks. Local party organizations may serve as a springboard for women to work their way up to national party offices. On the other hand, a centralized party structure may be more conducive to women entering the top echelons of the party. The central elite have the power to impose change upon the subnational party units. A more highly centralized level may give party leaders the ability to

select women as key decision makers—when the party leaders see fit to do so. Matland and Studlar (1996) point out that as a consequence, a central party organization can be held more directly accountable for the party's failure to take steps to promote women; the buck stops with the party leadership. In a more decentralized party, party leaders can point fingers at one another to escape responsibility for adding more women to the top ranks.

The second party characteristic, party pragmatism, describes the extent to which the party's program guides the party when acting on issues (Lane and Ersson, 1994). Parties with a high degree of pragmatism are considered flexible and may be more open to the demands of women.

The third component, the degree of fractionalization, refers to the ties a party has with organizations outside the party. A highly fractionalized party has organized relations with a number of groups and relies on these outside groups to attract party members and supporters. For example, parties with ties to powerful unions find it difficult to be flexible to women's claims because of their long-standing commitment to labor issues. Specifically, Rohrschneider (1993) points out that unions often oppose social movement goals because unions put a priority on economic issues at the expense of social issues, and especially those associated with the postmaterialist New Politics. Therefore, we expect that strong ties to outside groups will impede a party's ability to incorporate women into its higher ranks.

Finally, formal rules may shape who enters the top ranks of the party. Some parties have established internal party rules regarding the gender composition of party committees. For example, in 1989 at its annual party conference, the British Labour Party passed a resolution that mandated that women make up from one-third to one-half of selected party bodies at the local, regional, and national levels. Parties can adopt quotas or more informal recommendations regarding the number of women required on different committees. It is logical that parties with internal gender quotas for the party hierarchy are more likely to have a large number of women on their decision-making committees.

Data Analysis

This section systematically analyzes the mechanisms that influence change in the proportion of women on the national executive committees of fifty parties from 1975 to 1995 in ten Western European democracies. I pool a cross-section of data that includes observations for the gender composition of the NECs in each national election between 1975 and 1997 in these ten nations.[2] The application of this data to a meaningful statistical procedure required some careful methodological reasoning. The use of 375 cases allows for the legitimate use of ordinary least squares regression (OLS). Measures were collected for each

Table 3.2 Multivariate Model Explaining the Number of Women in Party Leadership

Explanatory Variable	% Women on NEC by Party
Women's Mobilization	
Presence of a Party Women's Organization	.01
Party Structure	
Degree Party Centralized	.09*
Degree Party Fractionalized	.11**
Degree Party Pragmatic	.02
Party Ideology	
Old Left Politics Scale	.08
New Left Politics Scale	.24***
Party Rules	
Internal Party Gender Rules	.54***
Adjusted R-Squared	.40
Number of Cases	375

Note: Table entries are standardized regression coefficients.
Significance level: *** = $p <. 01$, ** = $p < .05$,* = $p < .10$

of the independent and dependent variables from published national statistics and other data sources. A full explanation of variables and sources is contained in Appendix A.

Multivariate Analyses

Using the hypotheses outlined in the previous section, I created a multivariate model to test the combined influence of these explanatory factors. Table 3.2 presents the results of the model. Combined, these indicators explain 40% of the adjusted variance in the proportion of women on the parties' NECs. The second column displays the standardized OLS regression coefficients. The results reveal that the presence of a women's organization is not a significant predictor of women's representation on the NEC. As discussed in the previous section, the mere presence of a women's organization cannot measure its strength, demands on the party leadership, or choice of allies within the party.

The table shows that party structure, ideology, and rules all influence women's presence on the NEC. The results support the hypothesis that more

centralized and factionalized parties create more opportunities for women in top party positions. Both indicators achieve statistical significance, while the degree of pragmatism does not. The data suggest that, controlling for the other influences, in a centralized party the leadership has the authority to promote women to the top echelons when pressured. Further, a party with strong ties to more outside groups is more likely to have more women on its NEC. This finding runs counter to our hypothesis that ties to groups limit a party's autonomy. It appears that parties with ties to outside groups provide more points of access, so that women can climb to positions of power.

The second set of influences reveals that a leftist ideology is more conducive to women on the NEC, but specifically, a leftist ideology based on the New Politics issues is significantly related to the proportion of women on the NEC. Parties that incorporate new noneconomic issues from social movements are, by extension, more likely to incorporate women into their centers of power. Finally, the strongest impact comes from the presence of party rules, specifically internal gender quotas. Formal rules that ensure women's presence throughout the party help to bolster women's progress to the top party hierarchy.

Conclusions

Women's efforts to gain power are embedded in a set of institutions—formal rules, party structures, norms, and ideological traditions—that shape the effectiveness of their demands for equality. Past research on women's numerical representation in national legislatures found that electoral rules are important; women are more likely to be nominated and elected in party-list, proportional representation systems with large district magnitudes (Duverger, 1955; Lakeman, 1994; Rule, 1987; Beckwith, 1987; 1994; Matland, 1993; Matland and Studlar, 1996). Although there is substantial variation across parties, there has been little systematic research conducted on party institutions. From this research, it is clear that the institutional structures of some parties are more conducive to women's advancement; party organizational structures and ideology both condition women's efforts. Women are more likely to reach the top ranks of a centralized, fractionalized party with New Left values and formal rules for women's participation in the lower party bodies. A party with a strong leadership is better able to respond to women's demands. And a party with New Left values is more likely to view women's demands as legitimate and to share a closer historical relationship with the women's movement. Finally, it is logical that where women have enough power and the party is willing to adopt formal measures to ensure women's representation in internal party bodies, there will be more women on the party's highest decision-making body, the national executive committee.