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## The Descriptive Representation of Women in the 9th European Parliament

### Cover Page Footnote

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# The Descriptive Representation of Women in the 9th European Parliament

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## **ABSTRACT**

The European Parliament is often praised for its gender-equal composition and its high descriptive representation of women. However, there is a remarkable gender gap between the representation of women at the national and European level, and it is debated how these variations can be explained. After discussing theories of representation and reviewing data from the European Parliament on the share of women in national delegations and the political groups in the 9th European Parliament after Brexit, this paper evaluates whether institutional and contextual factors can explain the gender gap between the national and supranational level. It argues that the representation of women cannot be sufficiently explained by the institutional rules. Instead, ambitious national rules in some member states and the parties' role as gatekeepers can explain the high representation of women. These findings have implications for promoting gender equality in politics in the EU.

## **KEYWORDS**

European Parliament, gender equality, descriptive representation, European elections 2019

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The European Parliament (EP) is widely considered a role model for the high descriptive representation of women and is described as an “equality champion” (Abels, 2019, p. 407) or a “success story” (Chiva, 2019, p. 419). In the European elections in 2019, the percentage of women continued to increase (Abels, 2019, p. 408).

In recent years, the descriptive representation of women in the EP has been intensively studied, including the gender gap between the representation of women at the European and national levels. It is striking that women are often represented worse at the member state level (Fortin-Rittberger and Rittberger, 2014, p. 498), which raises the question why we see different outcomes at the supranational level. In addition, possible explanations for the diverging proportions of women in different member states (MS) and political groups have been sought (Hoecker, 2013; Fortin-Rittberger, 2014; Buzogány, 2015; Xydias, 2016, Abels 2019; Chiva, 2019). The supranational EP lends itself to analysis, as it is the only directly democratically legitimized institution in the “*sui generis*” EU multi-level system and its powers have been expanded in recent years by the Lisbon Treaty. However, its power remains limited compared to national parliaments (NP). The EP is particularly of interest for an analysis since one can analyze the level of parliamentary groups just as well as the representation of MS (Hoecker, 2013, pp. 87–88).

This paper focusses on the descriptive representation of women in the 9th EP and analyzes the representation at the Member States’ and party level with the help of contextual and institutional factors. Abels (2019) and Chiva (2019) previously analyzed the results of the 2019 European election. With the UK’s leaving of the EU on January 31, 2020, the British MEPs dropped out, whereupon the number of seats in the EP was reduced. Some of these seats were reserved for possible future MS, whereas some of the vacated seats were distributed to specific MS to compensate for population changes (European Parliament, 2020a). Thus, the proportion of women has also changed, which is why this paper analyzes the new distribution of seats after January 31, 2020.

This paper aims to answer whether the high descriptive representation of women in the 9th EP can be explained by institutional and contextual factors. Does the EP live up to its exemplary role in terms of women’s descriptive representation in the 9th legislature? This paper will argue that the high descriptive representation of women in the 9th EP cannot be adequately explained by institutional factors, but that the reasons for the extent of women’s representation lie at the intra-party and MS-levels. Accordingly, the exemplary role in terms of women’s representation belongs to certain MS and parties.

Section 2 argues that descriptive representation of women has a positive intrinsic value in contexts of discrimination. The analysis of the 9th EP in Section 3 shows that many developments of recent years persist, as women’s representation varies widely by political groups and MS, just like the extent of the gender gap between the national and European level. Section 4 shows that institutional factors cannot adequately explain women’s descriptive representation, but that contextual factors such as national parties’ gatekeeper role and domestic factors influence women’s representation.

## 2. THE CONCEPT OF DESCRIPTIVE REPRESENTATION FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

This section will contrast the concept of descriptive representation and its reception by Hanna F. Pitkin (1967) and feminist theorists. Pitkin (1967) and Griffiths (1960) emphasize the weaknesses of this understanding of representation in relation to the level of action,

which they call substantive representation. Phillips (1998; 2012) and Mansbridge (1999), on the other hand, highlight that descriptive representation can have intrinsic value in contexts of discrimination.

Griffiths coined the term descriptive representation, according to which “one person represents another by being sufficiently like him, [...] One cannot be made such a representative, one can only properly thought to be one” (Griffiths, 1960, p. 188). According to Pitkin, descriptive representation is primarily based on the idea of “standing for.” This was diametrically opposed to the “acting for” of substantive representation, which she defined as: “acting in the interests of the represented in a manner responsive to them” (Pitkin, 1967, p. 209). According to the concept of descriptive representation, the composition of the legislature should thus reflect the composition of the population and its characteristics such as class or gender like a mirror. She criticizes that through the level of “standing for” the central “acting for” comes too short, that is, the level of action does not receive sufficient consideration (Pitkin, 1967, pp. 60–61).

In the 1990s, Pitkin’s thoughts on descriptive representation were taken up by feminist theorists in the context of efforts to increase the proportion of women in parliaments. Pitkin is criticized for failing to recognize the intrinsic value of descriptive representation and for not considering sufficiently the situation of marginalized communities (Phillips, 2012, pp. 512–15). Thus, descriptive representation of women could provide more responsiveness when there is a context of mistrust between marginalized and privileged communities. New policy fields could emerge from the sensitivity of representatives of marginalized groups, especially when their interests are not yet fully articulated (Mansbridge, 1999, pp. 643–44). Philipps (2012) argues that descriptive representation should not be seen merely as a tool to increase substantive representation, but also as a symbol for citizenship and inclusion (pp. 516–17). Social meaning can be generated by showing that members of marginalized groups are capable of governing when this was previously doubted, so role models can have a positive effect on the perception of marginalized groups (Mansbridge, 1999, pp. 649–51). Also, women are seen as necessary to represent women’s interest at the legislative level. Descriptive representation offers the opportunity to open doors for a more participatory and revitalized democracy (Philipps, 1998, pp. 233–39). Thus, increasing descriptive representation should be sought when marginalized groups are able to represent themselves and when barriers have been created in the past that made it difficult or illegal for these groups to represent themselves – which is true for women (Mansbridge, 1999, p. 639). To achieve the most effective representation, it is important that women are represented in their diversity on significant committees, and that their presence exceeds a critical threshold (p. 626).

The concept of descriptive representation underlies this paper, and will be used to analyze women’s representation in the EP. Even though substantive representation in the sense of Pitkin (1967) is considered important, following Mansbridge (1999) and Philipps (1998; 2012), this work is limited to the positive self-purposes of the descriptive representation of women. While this paper relies on the notion of descriptive representation for analytical purposes, one should keep in mind that a high descriptive representation of women not always leads to more feminist policy outcomes. This is even more relevant when far-right parties increase both their vote share and their share of women (to attract female voters or because of institutional features), since their increased presence might lead to less feminist policies and could have detrimental effects for more marginalized women, like Muslim or immigrant women.

### 3. WOMEN'S DESCRIPTIVE REPRESENTATION IN THE 9<sup>TH</sup> EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

The results of the elections to the 9th EP will be analyzed regarding the proportion of women in the parliamentary groups, the differences between the member states as well as the gender gap between the female MEPs and the national parliaments.

In the 9<sup>th</sup> EP, the share of women initially increased to 41%, and decreased to 39.6% after the redistribution of seats in 2020, which still represents an increase of 2.6% compared to the previous legislative period (Abels, 2019, p. 408). Thus, the trend of a steady increase in the number of women in the EP continued. The representation of women in the 9<sup>th</sup> EP varies greatly within the political groups and MS (Chiva, 2019, p. 419).

*Table 1: Representation of Women in the 9th EP by Political Group*

Political Group	Women 9th EP	Seats 9th EP	Share of Women 9th EP	Share of Women 8th EP	$\Delta$ (9th-8th EP)
EPP	62	187	33.2%	28.6%	4.6
S&D	65	146	44.5%	44.0%	0.5
RE	43	98	43.9%	45.6%	-1.7
I&D	29	76	38.2%	29.7%	8.5
Greens/EFA	33	68	48.5%	40.4%	8.1
ECR	19	62	30.6%	22.7%	7.9
EUL/NGL	17	39	43.6%	51.9%	-8.3
No affiliation	10	29	34.5%	18.2%	16.3
Total	278	705	39.6%	36.1%	3.5

Source: European Parliament (2014), European Parliament (2020b)

As Table 1 shows, the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA) show the highest representation of women with a share of 48.5%, which has increased by 8.13% compared to the previous legislative period. The Socialists & Democrats (S&D), Renew Europe (RE), and European United Left/ Nordic Green Left (EUL/NGL) also have an above-average share of women. The share of women in EUL/NGL has fallen by over 8% compared to the 8th EP, in which the group had the highest share of women. Abels (2019) attributes this decline to a fragmentation of parties within the parliamentary group (pp. 414-15). All conservative and right-wing party groups were able to increase their share of women, although it is striking that Identity and Democracy (ID) has a quite significant proportion of women for a right-wing faction (38.2%) (Chiva, 2019, p. 420). Left-wing parties continue to have a higher share of women, but the difference is no longer as pronounced as in previous legislative periods (Buzogány, 2015, p. 364; Xydias, 2016, p. 803).

Against this backdrop and given the increase in votes for right-wing parties, it might seem surprising that the overall share of women has risen (Abels, 2019, p. 414; Chiva 2019, pp. 419-20), which is why a closer look into these parties is useful. The issue of representation of women in right-wing parties, especially in far-right and populist parties, is rather complex. This is perhaps best illustrated by one of Europe's most important far-right parties,

the French Rassemblement National (FRN). With Marine Le Pen as a party leader, FRN tried to appeal to women by fostering the image of the “working mother” while portraying Islam and immigration as a danger to women as well as linking women to “traditional” family values (Scrinzi, 2017). Other European far-right parties, like the German AfD, have an extremely critical stance regarding reproductive rights and perpetuate racialized sexism by using the xenophobic and racist image of the “foreign” perpetrator (Berg, 2019). Thus, on the level of substantive representation, far-right parties display sexist and racist images, while on the level of descriptive representation, they saw an increase of women in their political groups in the 9th EP. It is noteworthy, however, that this increase was mainly driven by the French Rassemblement National and the Italian Lega, two countries in which quotas have been installed (Abels, 2020, p. 415) (cf. Section 4.b).

The ambiguities within far-right parties set aside, the increase in the share of women in the 9th European Parliament cannot be explained solely by ideological differences between political groups, as was previously assumed (Hoecker, 2013, p. 94), which is why taking a look at the MS-level seems useful. As Table 2 shows, in 16 out of the 27 member states, the share of women in the respective national delegation increased (Abels, 2019, p. 410). As in the 8th EP, the top group is led by Finland (57.1%), followed by Sweden (52.4%). Denmark, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, and Slovenia have a 50% share of women, and France (49.6%) is the country among the frontrunners with the most seats in the EP. The presence of Nordic countries and countries with a relatively small population in the top group also applies to previous legislative periods (Hoecker, 2013, p. 95).

In contrast to previous legislative periods, however, no North–South divide can be observed (Hoecker, 2013, p. 117). Although the Nordic countries are among the frontrunners, southern European countries such as Spain and Portugal also have an above-average share of women. Among the 13 countries with a below-average share of women, all MS except Greece, Italy, Germany, and Belgium belong to the new member states. This East–West divide has also been observed in previous legislatures (Hoecker, 2013, p. 117; Chiva, 2019, p. 419). Before the UK’s exit, however, this looked somewhat different: except for Germany and Denmark, all EU-15 states had an above-average share of women and, except for Slovenia, all new member states were below the average (Chiva, 2012, p. 419).

The observed changes do not lend themselves to an easy explanation. It could be assumed that due to the lower mediatization compared to the European elections, some parties placed less emphasis on their share of women. However, the share of women among the newer MS is quite heterogeneous, with Slovenia and Latvia having a 50% share of women in their small delegations. While the share of women has increased sharply in Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Slovenia, it has decreased in Slovakia, Romania, and Estonia. The significance is however mediated by the small number of seats the relevant countries have in the EP.

*Table 2: Share of Women in EP and National Delegations by Country*

MS	Women	Seats	Share of Women 9 <sup>th</sup> EP	Share of Women 8 <sup>th</sup> EP	$\Delta$ (9 <sup>th</sup> – 8 <sup>th</sup> EP)	Share of Women NP 2019
AT	8	19	42.1%	44%	-1.9	38.9%
BL	8	21	38.1%	29%	9.1	42.4%
BU	5	17	29.4%	29%	0.4	27.1%
CY	0	6	0	17%	-17.0	17.9%
CZ	7	21	33.3%	38%	-4.7	20.6%
DE	36	96	37.5%	36%	1.5	31.7%
DK	7	14	50.0%	38%	12.0	39.7%
EE	2	7	28.6%	50%	-21.4	28.7%
ES	26	59	44.1%	41%	3.1	41.9%
FI	8	14	57.1%	54%	3.1	46.5%
FR	39	79	49.4%	42%	7.4	37.1%
GR	5	21	23.8%	24%	-0.2	21.7%
HR	5	12	41.7%	45%	-3.3	19.9%
HU	8	21	38.1%	19%	19.1	12.2%
IE	6	13	46.2%	55%	-8.8	24.3%
IT	30	76	39.5%	40%	-0.5	35.8%
LT	3	11	27.3%	9%	18.3	24.1%
LU	3	6	50.0%	33%	17.0	28.3%
LV	4	8	50.0%	37%	13.0	30.0%
MT	3	6	50.0%	67%	-17.0	14.9%
NL	14	29	48.3%	42%	6.3	35.1%
PL	18	52	34.6%	24%	10.6	27.9%
PT	10	21	47.6%	38%	9.6	40.4%
RO	6	33	18.2%	31%	-12.8	19.8%
SE	11	21	52.4%	55%	-2.6	47.6%
SI	4	8	50.0%	37%	13.0	22.1%
SK	3	14	21.4%	31%	-9.6	20.7%
EU-27	278	705	39.6%	37%	2.6	32.1%

Source: European Parliament (2014), European Parliament (2020b), Eurostat (2020)

In this legislative period, the gender gap (Fortin-Rittberger and Rittberger, 2014, p. 498) between the share of women in NPs and the share of women in the EP continues to persist but varies greatly in its extent by MS (Abels, 2019, p. 408). The share of women in the EP has increased to 39.6%, but the mean share of women in NPs in the EU-27 is 32.1% (Eurostat, 2020). Except for Belgium, Estonia, Cyprus, and Romania, the share of women



in national EP delegations is higher than the share of women in the NPs.

Differences in the size of the gender gap among MS with higher shares of women in the EP are also evident, with Hungary sending three times as many women to the EP as to the NP and Croatia and Ireland sending almost twice as many. There is also a difference of more than 20% in Slovenia and Latvia. In some countries with above-average proportions of women, such as Finland, Denmark and France, the proportion of women in the EP is often even more than 10 percentage points higher than in the NPs. This underlines the large differences among MS, and one could assume that some of them put a lot of emphasis on a high share of women at both national and European levels.

In the 9th EP, some of the developments of recent years persisted, as the proportion of women continued to increase in this legislative period. Conservative and right-wing parties have improved their electoral success and their share of women, but women are still better represented in the more left-leaning groups. The Nordic countries remain among the top performers in descriptive representation of women, whereas many of the new MS have below-average scores. The gender gap between the member state and European levels continues, but its extent varies widely across MS.

#### **4. EXPLAINING WOMEN'S DESCRIPTIVE REPRESENTATION IN THE 9TH EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT**

In the following, contextual and institutional factors will be weighed to explain the developments regarding the proportion of women in relation to the political groups, member states and the gender gap between the national and European level. The first strand of explanation deals with the role of institutional frameworks such as the competences of the EP, proportional representation, electoral list designs or statutory quota systems (Buzogány, 2015, p. 359). As in previous legislative terms, these institutional factors are not a sufficient explanation for the high proportion of women at the EU level and the gender gap, which is why contextual influences, such as party-political factors and political and socioeconomic culture, are also addressed (Chiva, 2012; Fortin-Rittberger and Rittberger, 2014; Buzogány, 2015). Descriptive representation of women is more likely to be explained by MS-level factors, and decisions made by national parties in their role as gatekeepers may have an impact on women's representation (Hoecker, 2013, pp. 138-42).

##### **4.1. INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS**

Explanatory approaches have been put forward that link the proportion of women to the institutional characteristics of the EP, such as its competence. According to the idea, “where there is power there are no women; and where there is no power there are women” (Freedman et al., 2002, as cited in Xydias, 2016, p. 809), the higher presence of women can be explained by the fact that EP elections, as “second order elections,” are considered less important compared to national elections, and are therefore more accessible to women (Reif and Schmitt, 1980, as cited in Rittberger, 2014, p. 499). Over time, however, the share of women and the influence of the EP have steadily increased, which is why the pertinence of this explanation has weakened, even if the question arises to what extent the EP's gain in influence is perceived by national parties and the voters (Abels, 2019, p. 408; Buzogány, 2015, p. 359). Others argue that the relatively young EP is seen as more female-friendly than national parliaments, and that this might have prevented a strong male hegemony (Footitt, 2002; Freedmann, 2002; Studlar and McAllister, 1991; Studlar and Welch 1991; as cited in Fortin-Rittberger, 2014, p. 499). These explanations are more plausible

for the first few terms, but they are not sufficient to adequately analyze current differences (Hoecker, 2013, p. 118).

As noted in the previous section, the correlation between women's representation and party ideology no longer holds as strongly as in previous legislative periods, as both the electoral success of conservative and right-wing parties and the descriptive representation of women increased in the 9th EP (Abels, 2019, p. 414; Chiva, 2019, pp. 419-20). The ID parliamentary group surprisingly increased its female representation, though almost half of the women belong to the French Rassemblement National or the Italian Lega Nord. The French LREM also has a strong influence on the proportion of women in the RE parliamentary group (Chiva, 2019, p. 420). This can be explained by legal quotas that apply to the parties' list of candidates. Fortin-Rittberger and Rittberger (2014) found that in the 6th and 7th EP, the proportion of women *ceteris paribus* is not related to a left-wing or Europhile political orientation, and the party orientation does not sufficiently explain the proportion of women, because national factors seem to play a role.

This part will now examine the impact of quotas set by law in the MS, which eleven MS<sup>1</sup> resorted to in 2019 (European Parliament, 2019). Depending on the MS, these quotas vary widely in terms of the proportion of women, list positions, and sanctions. In Romania, the quota only required each party to field at least one person of each gender, which achieved small effects (Policy Department for Citizen's Rights and Constitutional Affairs, 2019, p. 25). Women's representation on the electoral lists of the other MS with legal quotas ranged from 33% to 50%. Belgium and France implemented a 50% quota for women. The quota regulations differed regarding the position on party lists: in France, a list alternating by gender must be presented, while in Belgium the first two list positions may not be occupied by candidates of one gender. The implementation of the quota regulations is to be ensured by sanctions of varying severity: the designs range from financial sanctions (Croatia, Portugal), to a restriction of public funding (Italy, France), to a rejection of the list (Belgium, France, Poland, Slovenia, Spain) (Policy Department for Citizen's Rights and Constitutional Affairs, 2019, pp. 24-27). In the 9th EP, none of the countries with the highest percentage of women used legal quotas, which was also the case in the 8th EP (Buzogány, 2015, p. 364). Richard E. Matland (2005) showed that quotas in Scandinavian countries were adopted only after a significant share of women were represented in national parliaments. Also, regarding the Nordic frontrunners in the EP, quotas did not lead to a high representation of women. Although Luxembourg, Belgium, Spain, Slovenia, and Portugal have an above-average share of women, some countries with a similar share of women were able to achieve these results even without comparable regulations. Romania and Greece achieved very below-average results despite the use of statutory quotas. As in previous legislative terms, the impact of quota regulations in the 9th EP is smaller than expected (Abels, 2010; Fortin-Rittberger and Rittberger 2014; Fortin-Rittberger and Rittberger, 2015; Xydias 2016).

The electoral system has often been considered crucial for women's representation in parliaments, as proportional representation systems are supposed to facilitate women's candidacy (Hoecker, 2013, p. 120). In 1999, proportional representation was introduced within the EU to make the election more uniform and transparent and thus increase democratic legitimacy (Hoecker, 2013, p. 43; Fortin-Rittberger and Rittberger, 2014, p. 513). The current system can be described as "polymorphic proportional representation" (Nohlen, 2008,

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<sup>1</sup> These countries are Belgium, Greece, Spain, France, Croatia, Italy, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal, Romania, and Slovenia.

as cited in Hoecker, 2013, p. 121), as national systems differ and reflect the characteristics of the domestic political system, for example, in terms of the type of electoral lists, the division of electoral districts, and electoral thresholds (Fortin-Rittberger and Rittberger, 2014, p. 501; Buzogány, 2015, pp. 362–363). Chiva (2012) concluded that the use of preferential voting had a positive effect in the 6th and 7th EP elections (p. 473), and Hoecker (2013) found that, contrary to expectations, the election of parliamentarians through open lists did not have a negative impact on the representation of women (p. 122). In the 9th EP, the Nordic frontrunners applied preferential voting, but all new member states except Hungary and Romania also used this system, many of which have a below-average share of women in their national delegations (Abels, 2019, pp. 411–12). The states that use closed lists are also quite heterogeneous, ranging from Romania at the bottom of the list to states with above-average representation such as Spain and Portugal. As in the last legislature, states that use a preferential voting system with a single transferable vote seem to have a high share of women, but again the question arises as to how significant this correlation is, as only Malta and Ireland use this system (Buzogány, 2015, p. 364; Abels, 2019, p. 411–12).

The relationship between the characteristics of the electoral system and the representation of women in the 9th EP is not clear, which fits with the analytical results of Fortin-Rittberger and Rittberger (2014) for the 2004 and 2009 European elections. They argue that since EP elections are not more proportional than national parliamentary elections, proportionality alone cannot be a reason for higher female representation at the EU level. Moreover, institutional factors would not have a statistically significant effect on the share of women, and thus cannot explain the gender gap either (pp. 497–508). At the national level, the institutional arrangements do have an effect since they result from the respective cleavages. However, at the EU level, institutional characteristics were imposed independently of these cleavages. Thus, the institutional arrangements at the EU level are rather exogenous and their effect is diminished, as citizens base their choice on national cleavages and the respective party system. For this reason, Fortin-Rittberger and Rittberger see national contextual factors as more meaningful in explaining the descriptive representation of women at the EU level (pp. 512–514).

#### 4.2. CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

Since institutional factors cannot sufficiently explain the higher share of women in the 9th EP, this sub-section will now turn to contextual factors at the MS-level, such as the role of national political parties, socioeconomic factors, and the broader political culture. Since the 9th EP confirms many trends of recent legislative periods, previous approaches and past analytical results (Fortin-Rittberger and Rittberger, 2014; Buzogány, 2015) are compared to this term.

Political culture is often used to explain the variation in women’s representation by party family and MS. According to Almond and Verba (1963), political culture includes the “totality of all politically relevant opinions, attitudes, and values held by the members of a nation,” which can include the valorization of women as politicians (Almond and Verba, 1963, as cited in Hoecker, 2013, p. 133). To operationalize the broad concept of political culture, one can investigate the presence of an egalitarian culture in each MS, as well as socio-economic factors. The female labor force participation rate, low gender income gaps, and the presence of egalitarian role models can positively influence the descriptive representation of women, including at the EU level (Buzogány, 2015, pp. 365–64). In 2018, the female labor force participation rate was the highest in Sweden, followed by Finland. Coun-

tries that sent relatively few women to the EP, such as Romania, and Greece, had a below-average share of women participating in the labor force (OECD, 2021). Also, countries in which the highest proportions of children benefit from childcare under formal arrangements are among those countries with a higher share of women in the EP, which suggests that childcare services positively influence the recruitment of women at the EU level (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2019). The Gender Equality Index assembles different indicators from categories such as power, money, health, and knowledge, that give an overview of the state of gender equality. Not surprisingly, the countries that achieved a remarkably high representation of women in the 9<sup>th</sup> EP are also among the frontrunners in this index. Greece, Romania, and Slovakia, on the other hand, are below average both in the Gender Equality Index as well as in the share of women in their respective national delegations sent to the EP (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2020).

Hoecker adds that the early introduction of women's suffrage had a positive effect, as politics could not emerge as a purely male domain. High representation at the EU level could also come about without a very egalitarian political culture, as in some new MS, but in this case the gender gap would then be larger (Hoecker, 2013, pp. 134-140). Moreover, it turns out that a left-wing party ideology can positively influence the presence of women, as well as a high proportion of women in the NPs, which can act as a candidate pool for the EP election (Buzogány, 2015, p. 367). Accordingly, in the 9<sup>th</sup> EP, countries with a strongly above-average share of women in the NPs do not display a remarkably lower representation of women at the national level as compared to the EU level. Thus, it seems that a public awareness of women's representation at the national level positively influences women's descriptive representation at the EU level – and not only due to a lower salience of elections (Xydias, 2016, p. 809). The first hurdle of legislative recruitment is to select oneself for office, which seems particularly relevant when explaining gendered patterns in candidate recruitment (Norris, 1996 in Matland, 2005, p. 64). A look at socio-economic-factors and the presence of an egalitarian political culture suggests that women could be more likely to decide to run for a European office under favorable socio-economic circumstances. However, the broad concept of political culture is, even when one looks at socio-economic indicators, not able to explain all patterns. The role of political parties as gatekeepers will be examined in more detail, as the second hurdle to run for office is the nomination by parties (Hoecker, 2013, p. 135; Norris, 1996, as cited in Matland, 2005, p. 64).

National political parties play a key role in selecting candidates for the national and European level and thus determine the chances women have in elections based on their list position (Hoecker, 2013, p. 128; Fortin-Rittberger and Rittberger, 2014, p. 506; Fortin-Rittberger and Rittberger, 2015, pp. 767-68). Thus, it is their task to decide how intra-party currents are reflected on the candidate list, where gender balance may also play a role (Fortin-Rittberger and Rittberger, 2014, p. 513). These different nomination processes are key to explaining interstate variation in women's representation (Fortin-Rittberger and Rittberger, 2015, pp. 779-80), as parties affect the recruitment process both ideologically and procedurally (Xydias, 2016, p. 803). If parties at the national level do not valorize the descriptive representation of women – for ideological or procedural reasons of the recruitment process or because this does not reflect preferences of national voters – women consequently have no chance to be elected to the EP. Parties are thus the gatekeepers at the national level that have a significant impact on women's representational success at the European level (Fortin-Rittberger and Rittberger, 2014, pp. 513-15). This also seems quite

plausible for the 9th EP, as the ideological orientation of the European parliamentary group is not sufficient to explain the results and the divergence between MS. Consequently, as gatekeepers, parties can make strategic decisions regarding descriptive representation, determining not only whether and how to field women, but also whether to implement internal party and legislative quota systems (Buzogány, 2015, p. 367).

The explanatory power of institutional factors, such as the design of proportional representation or legal quota regulations, appears to be quite low for the 9th EP, and one can infer that there is no monocausal explanation for the representation *sui generis* (Hoecker, 2013, p. 138). Thus, it is not the European institutional rules of the game in which a high representation of women is rooted, but contextual factors such as political culture and the behavior of national parties as gatekeepers that influence descriptive representation. Accordingly, the EP's status as a role model cannot be solely explained by institutional arrangements and must be credited instead to factors within the MS, such as the egalitarian political culture and the parties' facilitating behavior. Accordingly, the role model status does not belong to the EP *per se*, but to those national parties and MS that have established an appropriate culture or rules to promote women's representation at both levels.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This paper considered the descriptive representation of women in the 9th EP and analyzed whether the high percentage of women can be better explained by institutional or contextual factors. In addition, it addressed the question of whether the EP lived up to its exemplary status in terms of the descriptive representation of women that it often holds in the research literature. The analysis revealed that while the descriptive representation of women in the 9th EP is higher than in many concurrent NPs, this is not due to the institutional rules or the EP's singularity, but rather due to the egalitarian culture and rules of some MS and national parties. Accordingly, the exemplary role belongs to these actors rather than to the EP.

In addition to the continuous increase in the share of women, this paper showed that other characteristics of the previous legislative periods also apply to the 9th EP. Finland and Sweden continue to have the highest share of women in the EP, while many of the new MS have a below-average share of women. The gender gap between the national and European level also remains noticeable, but masks large differences between MS. At the same time, while the share of women in left-wing parliamentary groups continues to be higher, right-wing parliamentary groups have increased their share of women, making the correlation between political orientation and descriptive representation of women less pronounced. Other factors, such as proportional representation and statutory quotas, also cannot adequately explain the differences in the representation of women among MS. Instead, contextual factors at the MS-level, such as the role of parties as gatekeepers and political culture, play a role. Accordingly, the credit for representational success does not belong to the EP, but to those national parties and MS that have established an appropriate culture or rules to promote women's representation at both levels.

Further research is needed into the exact role of parties as gatekeepers at the national level and the influence of political culture and of the socio-economic context on EP elections. Questions also remain as to the causes of the disparities between old and new member states, and whether the differences observed among MS are related more to the length of membership or to domestic characteristics. Lastly, it should be noted that while the increase in the share of women in the 9th EP as well as the election of the first female

EU Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, can be perceived as positive signs for the representation of women, diversity in the EP should be strengthened further. This is especially important given the recent rise of right-wing and conservative parties, which have traditionally not supported gender equality policies, and are therefore expected to negatively impact women's substantive representation (Abels, 2019, p. 420). Research into the underrepresentation of women can guide policies, such as the implementation of ambitious quotas or the empowerment of women and non-binary people within parties. This could work to counteract right-wing forces as well as sustain positive trends.

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