

Improving gender equality and women's representation in politics

Advocacy paper

January 2022

We are missing women in European politics. While women have the same formal political rights as men, and some individual women hold high political positions, women are still excluded from decision-making positions. This means that **more than half of the population is persistently under-represented in decision-making**, as well as its legitimate interests, needs, and expectations.

EIGE's Gender Equality Index on the **EU domain of political power scored 58.5 out of 100** in 2021, with women making up only 34% of ministers and 33% of parliamentarians in the EU Member States. Despite the progress witnessed in the very last years, for instance, 13 out of the 27 European Commissioners and 39% of MEPs being women, much more must be done to tackle vertical and horizontal segregation.

We must ensure that all women have **equal opportunities to enter governing bodies** and that **women's interests and concerns are on the political agenda**. Achieving an equal representation of women is essential for European democracy. The measures we adopt and implement must be ambitious and binding so that women do not only have equal opportunities to engage in politics but also have equal access to decision-making positions and real power when occupying these positions.

1. Why is improving gender equality essential for European democracy?

Increasing **European democracy's transparency, accountability, and representativeness** is crucial to the success of the 2024 European elections. Improving **gender equality is paramount** to achieving these aims. **Equality between women and men is a legally binding goal of the EU**, entrenched in a large body of European legislation, including Articles 2, 3, and 8 of the Lisbon Treaty.

Decisions made at European level impact the daily life of men, and women throughout Europe. Hence, **gender equality must be at the core of European policy-making and women must be equally represented** when such decisions are made.

"Natural" progress is not enough to tackle centuries of unequal power relations between women and men. Failing to address these inequalities proactively results in perpetuating them and sustains the under-representation of women in the political world. **Legislation must create the conditions for equal power of women and men. The EU must strive towards parity democracy:** a societal organisation in which women and men equally share rights, responsibilities, and power.

A big hurdle for women to access decision-making positions is the unequal opportunity they experience when aiming to enter the European Parliament. The number of women elected to the European Parliament reflects how many female candidates are encouraged to run, and their position on candidate lists, namely whether they got electable positions depending on the national electoral

system. That is why **the EU must lead the way by taking binding measures to guarantee equality between women and men in politics.**

Tools such as appropriately designed **quotas have proven to be the most effective tool for "fast-tracking" women's representation in elected bodies of government.** Binding legislated candidate quotas currently exist in nine EU Member States, such as Belgium and Portugal, where parliaments are now gender-balanced with respectively 42% and 40% women MPs. **Mandatory quotas are a necessary and temporary tool** to address an imbalance created by structural causes, gender biased electoral systems and a deeply unequal division of power between men and women.

Studies show that countries **without tools like binding legislated candidate quotas will take more than 60 years to achieve gender parity in their parliament while those with binding quotas are expected to take less than 20 years** (EIGE Gender Equality Index 2021). European women and European democracy cannot wait 60 years. Codes of conduct or voluntary quotas make progress much slower. Hence, we count on you to champion equal representation of women and men in leadership roles and **demand the implementation of binding mechanisms to ensure that candidate lists are gender-equal, notably through a zipped system.**

2. How to advance women's representation in leadership roles?

As leaders of your political groups, you have a privileged position to steer the political agenda and **improve women's representation and participation in politics.** That is why we **call on you** to work towards:

- Making **gender equality a fundamental and binding principle of European elections** thereby reinforcing the EU's democracy and implementing article 2 of the EU Treaty;
- Establishing **mandatory parity in candidate lists both for national and Union-wide constituency lists.** Those lists should have an equal number of male and female candidates;
- Ensuring **female candidates are placed at electable places on national and Union-wide constituency lists by making compulsory** the use of methods to alternate female and male candidates such as zipped lists;
- Spelling out the **obligation for political parties to nominate both a woman and a man as lead candidates.**

Improving women's representation in politics and at decision-making positions is essential to European democracy and to make it more transparent, accountable, and representative. **The existing inequalities are rooted in unequal power relations and "natural" progress will not adequately solve the issue. We must be proactive to materialise equality between women and men and we count on you to champion this goal with ambitious legislative measures.** While implementing such measures, it is also essential to tackle the other barriers impeding women to participate fully in politics and accessing decision-making positions such as **all forms of violence against women and girls**, including online violence; the **unequal distribution of domestic and care responsibilities**; the **unequal distribution of party support** to female and male candidates; and the **unequal access of women candidates to the media** prior to and during electoral campaigns.

Appendix

DRAFT REPORT on the reform of the electoral law of the European Union ([2020/2220 INL](#))

EWL suggested wordings

The upcoming [INL report](#) on the reform of the electoral law of the European Union is a **momentous opportunity to improve women’s representation and participation in politics**. We believe that to improve **equality between women and men in politics and increase women’s representation in decision-making positions**, it is crucial to **include amendments that**:

- Make gender equality a horizontal principle of the European elections and a minimal democratic standard;
- Establish gender mainstreaming in all the activities of the European Union;
- Call for mandatory gender balance on candidate lists;
- Foster parity and call for the adoption of concrete measures to ensure candidate lists have an equal number of male and female candidates, such as the use of alternation or zipped lists;
- Ensure a gender-equal representation is maintained in the European Parliament, including during maternity/paternity/parental leave;
- Require the application of gender equality to candidate lists for national and/or Union-wide constituency lists and encourage the use of gender zipped lists.

Reference	Original text from the report	EWL suggested wordings
To include in the recitals	new	-Having regard to the Lisbon Treaty and its Articles 1a, 2, and 8 on the EU legally binding goal to promote equality between women and men.
To include in the recitals	new	-Having regards to the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 recognising gender equality as a core value of the EU, a fundamental right and key principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights and stressing the value of inclusive and diverse leadership at decision-making positions.
To include in the recitals	new	-Having regard to its resolution of 21 January 2021 on the EU Strategy for Gender

		Equality (2019/2169 (INI)) calling for the introduction of binding measures to ensure the equal representation of women and men in European and national parliaments.
To include in the recitals	new	-Having regard to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (2012) and in particular its Article 8 establishing the promotion of gender equality through all the European Union's activities and hereby establishing the principle of gender mainstreaming.
Motion for resolution (Recital M)	whereas the reform of the European Parliament's electoral procedure should aim to enhance the democratic and transnational dimension of the European elections and the democratic legitimacy of the Union decision-making process, reinforce the concept of citizenship of the Union, improve the functioning of the European Parliament and the governance of the Union, make the work of the European Parliament more legitimate, strengthen the principles of electoral equality and equal opportunities, enhance the effectiveness of the system for conducting European elections, and bring Members of the European Parliament closer to their voters, and in particular the youngest amongst them;	whereas the reform of the European Parliament's electoral procedure should aim to enhance the democratic and transnational dimension of the European elections and the democratic legitimacy of the Union decision-making process, reinforce the concept of citizenship of the Union, improve the functioning of the European Parliament and the governance of the Union, make the work of the European Parliament more legitimate, strengthen the principles of electoral equality and equal opportunities, in particular between women and men , enhance the effectiveness of the system for conducting truly representative European elections, and bring Members of the European Parliament closer to their voters, and in particular the youngest amongst them;
Motion for resolution (paragraph 4)	Observes that diverging electoral cultures have resulted in a range of different	Observes that diverging electoral cultures have resulted in a range of different

	<p>electoral systems; considers therefore that common minimum standards are needed, in order to ensure approximation towards a unified European electoral law and equality of the vote for citizens of the Union, including as regards: the right to register a party and to stand for elections; access to ballots; the fielding of candidates; accessibility of voting; or what happens on the day of the elections;</p>	<p>electoral systems; considers therefore that common minimum binding standards are needed, in order to achieve a unified European electoral law and equality of the vote for citizens of the Union, including as regards: the right to register a party and to stand for elections; access to ballots; the fielding of candidates; equal participation and representation of women and accessibility of voting; or what happens on the day of the elections;</p>
<p>motion for resolution (paragraph 8)</p>	<p>Considers gender equality to be a key horizontal element for improving the quality of EU democracy and enhancing a European public space; calls on Member States to apply this principle and the provisions contained in the Parliament's proposal in the attached legislative act in a comprehensive way, in accordance with their own competences; calls for the introduction of lists of candidates with an equal number of male and female candidates for the electable places, for example through the use of zipped lists or other equivalent methods, since, in many Member States, there is no legislation that ensures political gender parity in elections;</p>	<p>Considers gender equality to be a binding horizontal principle for improving the quality of EU democracy and enhancing a truly representative and participative European public space; calls on Member States to apply this principle and the provisions contained in the Parliament's proposal in the attached legislative act in a comprehensive way, in accordance with their own competences; calls for the introduction of lists of candidates with an equal number of male and female candidates and ensuring women are at electable places, for example through the use of zipped lists or other equivalent methods, since, in many Member States, there is no legislation that ensures political gender parity in elections;</p>
<p>Motion for resolution (paragraph 15)</p>	<p>Considers that the introduction of a joint constituency from which forty-six members of the European Parliament shall be elected and in which lists are</p>	<p>Considers that the introduction of a joint constituency from which forty-six members of the European Parliament shall be elected and in which lists are</p>

	<p>headed by each political family's candidate for the post of President of the Commission could offer an opportunity to enhance the democratic and transnational dimension of the European elections; believes that the goal of establishing a joint constituency is achievable only if geographical, demographic and gender balance is ensured, by guaranteeing that smaller Member States are not put at a competitive disadvantage compared to the larger Member States; suggests in this respect introducing binding demographic representation in the lists for the joint constituency, such as maximum thresholds for candidates residing in the same Member State and a minimum obligatory representation of nationals of different Member States; encourages European parties and movements to appoint candidates in the joint lists coming from all Member States;</p>	<p>headed by each political family's candidate for the post of President of the Commission could offer an opportunity to enhance the democratic and transnational dimension of the European elections; believes that the goal of establishing a joint constituency is achievable only if geographical, demographic and gender equality is ensured, by the compulsory use of methods to alternate female and male candidates such as zipped lists and by guaranteeing that smaller Member States are not put at a competitive disadvantage compared to the larger Member States; suggests in this respect introducing binding demographic representation in the lists for the joint constituency, such as maximum thresholds for candidates residing in the same Member State and a minimum obligatory representation of nationals of different Member States; encourages European parties and movements to appoint candidates in the joint lists coming from all Member States;</p>
<p>Motion for resolution (paragraph 15 a)</p>	<p>new</p>	<p>Calls each European political party, coalition of national parties or movement to put forward both a female and male lead candidates for the Presidency of the European Commission.</p>
<p>Motion for resolution (Article 26, paragraph 5)</p>	<p>Where Parliament establishes a vacancy of a seat of a member elected from the Union-wide constituency, the President shall inform the European Electoral Authority thereof, and invite it to fill the</p>	<p>Where Parliament establishes a vacancy of a seat of a member elected from the Union-wide constituency, the President shall inform the European Electoral Authority thereof, and invite it to fill the</p>

	<p>seat without delay. Vacancies of seats of members elected from the Union-wide constituency shall be filled by the next candidate in the relevant list, according to the order of precedence</p>	<p>seat without delay. Vacancies of seats of members elected from the Union-wide constituency shall be filled by the next candidate in the relevant list according to the order of precedence, provided that the existing number of female and male members is maintained; where required to safeguard equal women representation, the seat should only be filled by the next women candidate.</p>
<p>Motion for resolution (Article 26 paragraph 6)</p>	<p>new</p>	<p>The Member going on maternity, paternity, parental leave or prolonged sick leave should be temporarily replaced by the next candidate on the relevant list, if the leaving member is a woman the temporary replacement must also be a woman, as to maintain equal representation.</p>
<p>Proposal for a council regulation (recital 2a)</p>	<p>new</p>	<p>-Having regard to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (2012) and in particular its Article 8 establishing the promotion of gender equality throughout all the European Union's activities and hereby establishing the principle of gender mainsreaming.</p>
<p>Proposal for a council regulation (recital 5)</p>	<p>Article 17(7) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) gives the European Parliament the right to elect the President of the European Commission. In order to give that right its appropriate expression, the European public sphere should be developed in such a way that all European voters are allowed to indicate their</p>	<p>Article 17(7) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) gives the European Parliament the right to elect the President of the European Commission. In order to give that right its appropriate expression, the European public sphere should be developed in such a way that all European voters are allowed to indicate their</p>

	<p>preferred candidate for the President of the European Commission. For this to happen, the lead candidates nominated by a European political party, by a movement or by a coalition of European parties, need to be able to stand behind a common electoral programme in all Member States. Likewise, a Union-wide constituency, in which lists are headed by each political family's candidate for President of the Commission, should be created, in order to enhance the democratic and pan-European dimension of the European elections. That Union-wide constituency should be subject to clear rules ensuring gender and demographic proportionality, with particular attention to small and medium sized Member States</p>	<p>preferred candidate for the President of the European Commission. For this to happen, and to ensure equal representation of women and men, each European political party, coalition of national parties or movement must nominate both a female and a male candidate and need to be able to stand behind a common electoral programme in all Member States. Likewise, a Union-wide constituency, in which lists are headed by each political family's candidate for President of the Commission, should be created, in order to enhance the democratic and pan-European dimension of the European elections. That Union-wide constituency should be subject to clear rules ensuring gender and demographic proportionality, with particular attention to small and medium sized Member States</p>
<p>Proposal for a council regulation (recital 7)</p>	<p>In the European democracy action plan, the Commission has committed to promoting access to democratic participation, which entails inclusiveness and equality in democratic participation, as well as gender balance in politics and decision-making. In its 2020-2025 gender equality strategy, the Commission stated that equal opportunity in participation is essential for representative democracy at all levels. Gender equality and democratic, informed and transparent procedures for the selection of candidates to the European Parliament elections, including the lead candidate, are key horizontal elements for reinforcing</p>	<p>In the European democracy action plan, the Commission has committed to inclusiveness and equality in democratic participation, as well as gender balance in politics and decision-making. In its 2020-2025 gender equality strategy, the Commission stated that gender equal representation and participation is essential for inclusive and diverse leadership at all levels of decision-making positions. The European Parliament resolution 2019/2169 (INI) of 21 January 2021 calls for the introduction of binding measures to ensure gender parity in the European and national parliaments.</p>

	representativeness and democracy.	Gender equality, ensured by the mandatory use of methods to alternate female and male candidates such as zipped lists and democratic, informed and transparent procedures for the selection of candidates to the European Parliament elections, including the lead candidate, are binding horizontal principles for reinforcing representativeness and democracy. Those principles should apply to all lists of candidates of the elections to the European Parliament in the national constituencies and in the Union-wide constituency.
Proposal for a council regulation (Article 10)	All political parties and political movements and European electoral entities participating in elections to the European Parliament shall observe democratic procedures and transparency in selecting their candidates for election to the European Parliament. The lists of candidates for election to the European Parliament shall ensure gender parity. This shall be ensured through the introduction of lists of candidates with an equal number of male and female candidates for the electable places. The names of the male and female candidates shall appear alternately on the ballot paper.	All political parties and political movements and European electoral entities participating in elections to the European Parliament shall observe democratic procedures and transparency in selecting their candidates for election to the European Parliament. The lists of candidates for election to the European Parliament shall ensure gender parity. This shall be ensured through the compulsory introduction of lists of candidates with an equal number of male and female candidates for the electable places. The alternation of male and female candidates must be ensured by the use of methods such as zipped lists.
Proposal for a council regulation (Article 12, paragraph 3)	In each Member State, Members of the European Parliament shall be elected using the list system or the single transferable vote. Member States may authorise voting based on a preferential list system in accordance with	In each Member State, Members of the European Parliament shall be elected using the list system or the single transferable vote. Member States may authorise voting based on a preferential list system in accordance with

	the procedure that they decide to adopt.	the procedure that they decide to adopt. The use of preferential voting in these Member States must respect gender equality and ensure there is an equal number of female and male candidates.
Proposal for a council regulation (Article 15, paragraph 12)	The lists of candidates for the Union-wide constituency shall consist of the names of candidates who, in accordance with EU law, are citizens of the Union.	The lists of candidates for the Union-wide constituency shall consist of the names of candidates who, in accordance with EU law, are citizens of the Union. The lists of candidates must be composed of an equal number of female and male candidates which must be alternated through the use of methods like zipped systems.
Proposal for a council regulation (Article 27 paragraph 3)	The Authority shall be composed of one member appointed by each Member State, who shall be professors of law or political science. The members of the Authority will elect its president, vice-president, and secretary by simple majority, in a separate vote. The Authority shall take decisions by consensus or, if that is not possible, by simple majority. The members of the Authority shall not be members of the European Parliament, hold any electoral mandate or be a current or former employee of any EU institution or of any European political party or movement, or of any European political foundation.	The Authority shall be composed of one member appointed by each Member State, who shall be professors of law or political science. The resulting Authority must have an equal number of female and male members. The members of the Authority will elect its president, vice-president, and secretary by simple majority, in a separate vote. The duo made of the President and Vice-President must be composed of at least one woman. The Authority shall take decisions by consensus or, if that is not possible, by simple majority. The members of the Authority shall not be members of the European Parliament, hold any electoral mandate or be a current or former employee of any EU institution or of any European political party or movement, or of any European political foundation.

<p>Proposal for a council regulation (Article 27 paragraph 4)</p>	<p>The Authority shall be represented by its president who shall take all decisions of the Authority on its behalf. If the president of the Authority no longer fulfils the conditions required for the performance of his or her duties, he or she may be dismissed by common accord by at least 3/5 of the members of the Authority and on the basis of a report drawn up by the alternative majority reasoning its proposal of dismissal. The president of the Authority shall be independent in the performance of his or her duties. When acting on behalf of the Authority, the president shall neither seek nor take instructions from any institution or government or from any other body, office or agency. The president of the Authority shall refrain from any act which is incompatible with the nature of his or her duties. The members of the Authority shall be appointed for a five-year, non-renewable term. The five-year term of the Authority shall begin 30 days after the beginning of the parliamentary term as referred to in Article 20. A vacancy in the Authority caused by resignation, retirement, dismissal or death shall be filled in accordance with the same procedure as for the initial appointment.</p>	<p>The Authority shall be represented by its president who shall take all decisions of the Authority on its behalf. If the president of the Authority no longer fulfils the conditions required for the performance of his or her duties, he or she may be dismissed by common accord by at least 3/5 of the members of the Authority and on the basis of a report drawn up by the alternative majority reasoning its proposal of dismissal. The president of the Authority shall be independent in the performance of his or her duties. When acting on behalf of the Authority, the president shall neither seek nor take instructions from any institution or government or from any other body, office or agency. The president of the Authority shall refrain from any act which is incompatible with the nature of his or her duties. The members of the Authority shall be appointed for a five-year, non-renewable term. The five-year term of the Authority shall begin 30 days after the beginning of the parliamentary term as referred to in Article 20. A vacancy in the Authority caused by resignation, retirement, dismissal or death shall be filled in accordance with the same procedure as for the initial appointment, while ensuring the existing number of female and male members is maintained.</p>
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