

## Women in the European Parliament: effects of the voting system, strategies and political resources. The case of the French delegation.

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### Abstract:

This article aims to provide elements to explain the feminisation of French MEPs. While the voting system should be taken into account, its effects can only be understood in relation with two elements: on the one hand, the position of the European Parliament in the French political field; on the other, the specific configuration of social and political struggles of the public space in 1990s France. Within this framework, gender constitutes a political resource that is more valuable in the European Parliament than in the national parliament; as a result, women who are less politically professionalised are promoted. They turn towards forms of parliamentary “goodwill” and strategies of over-involvement in European political roles. The relative specificity of the postures they adopt within the institution does not have to do with a hypothetical “feminine nature”, but with a set of sociopolitical processes.

**Keywords:** Gender and politics, MEPs, European elections, Political paths, Parliamentary work, Parliamentary activities.

### Résumé :

Cet article vise à apporter des éléments d'explication quant à la féminisation des élus français au Parlement européen. S'il semble nécessaire de prendre en compte le mode de scrutin, ses effets ne peuvent se comprendre qu'en relation avec deux éléments : d'une part avec la position du Parlement européen dans le champ politique français ; d'autre part avec la configuration propre des luttes sociales et politiques qui traversent l'espace public français au cours des années 1990. C'est dans ce cadre que le genre constitue une ressource politique plus rentable au Parlement européen qu'au parlement français, avec pour conséquence la promotion de femmes moins familiarisées avec l'exercice du métier politique. Des femmes qui de ce fait s'orientent davantage vers des formes de « bonne volonté » parlementaire et des stratégies de surinvestissement des rôles politiques européens. La spécificité relative des postures qu'elles adoptent au sein de l'institution renvoie donc moins à une hypothétique « nature féminine », qu'à un ensemble de processus sociopolitiques.

**Mots-clés :** Genre et politique, Députés européens, Elections européennes, Trajectoires politiques, Travail parlementaire.

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## Introduction

The European Parliament (EP) has one of the highest proportions of women in Europe. However, gender parity is still a long way off. By late 2006, before the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the European Union, women made up just under a third of the assembly (30.4%). The voting system is the first variable to be considered in terms of explaining the high representation of women in this assembly. The party-list proportional representation single-round voting, practised in 22 out of 25 EU countries in 2004 (Stöver, Wüst, 2005), is more conducive to the election of women (Matland, 1998; Matland, Montgomery, 2003; Norris, 2004).

However, the voting system variable does not completely account for this. As a matter of fact, there are considerable variations between countries, even between countries with similar voting systems. There are fewer women among the MEPs of Cyprus, Poland, Italy, Czech Republic and Latvia. Inversely, in Sweden (the only country with equal numbers of men and women), the Netherlands, Denmark, Estonia and France, over 40% of MEPs elected to serve in Strasbourg are women. In this regard, recent works (Tremblay *et al.*, 2007) put into perspective the role of other variables; especially political parties and political situations, as well as interactions between political order and social order. In addition to these, this

article will attempt to show that the causality between the voting system and the proportion of women is less dependent on the near-automatic consequences of legal rules than the logic that shapes the interplay of political configurations – without which it is impossible to understand the concrete effect of voting systems. A multi-dimensional analysis of political recruitment (Nay, 2001) based concurrently on the “strategies of political actors” and the “institutional constraints imposed by all (formal or informal) rules which govern political life” (Nay, 1998, p. 168), appear heuristic in this context. Judging by this perspective, regional elections in France, for example, are characterised by the fact that in constituting party lists, balance in terms of “requirements of social representativeness” – especially in relation to gender – is taken into account. Elections are also characterised by the promotion of representatives who are, *a priori*, less likely to be given elective responsibilities. Moreover, it is imperative to question the implications of the exercise of power. For instance, to what extent are women confined to certain sectors of legislative activity, as is the case with other assemblies (Achin, 2005)? Furthermore, do men monopolise positions of power? Do women play their role as MEPs differently? And finally, is this

characteristic of “feminine specificity”,<sup>1</sup> as claimed in certain quarters?

In order to shed some light on the combined effects of the voting system and other variables on the election of women and the exercise of European power, this article will concentrate on analysing the French delegation to the European Parliament for several reasons. First of all, the large proportion of women in the French delegation (42.3%) in Strasbourg ranks fifth out of the twenty-seven national delegations,<sup>2</sup> which is an unexpected fact. Indeed, unlike Sweden, the Netherlands and Denmark, where the high number of women elected to national parliaments is similar to that in the European Parliament, this is not the case with France. Overall, France has a particularly low number of women in elective positions at the various decision-making levels; only 10.9% of mayors elected in the 2001 municipal elections were women, 3% of the presidents of departmental councils in 2003, and 18.5% members of the National Assembly in 2007. This places the French Parliament in 18<sup>th</sup> position among the 27 member countries of the Union.<sup>3</sup> In this context, the European Parliament is an exception. In the case of France, the proportion of women elected to the European Parliament is a phenomenon that

is both exceptional – given the small proportion of women elected to other French political assemblies – and relatively old. The Law of 6 June 2000, which imposes gender parity in political elections<sup>4</sup> in France, does not alone explain it. Between 1979 and 2004, women made up a quarter of all MEPs. This number has however been increasing at every election, especially after the fourth legislature (1994-1999), rising from 22% of French representatives in 1979, to 27% between 1994 and 1999, to 41% between 1999 and 2004 (figure 1). All these elections were held before the law on parity was passed.<sup>5</sup>

The feminisation of the French component of the European Parliament is therefore a particularly striking phenomenon. This exception constitutes an enigma that the literature cannot completely solve. Of course, the large number of women in the European Parliament, particularly in the left-wing parties, has often been underscored by various works on the socio-political representativeness of MEPs (Vallance, Davies, 1986; Norris, Franklin, 1977; Hix, Lord, 1997; Bryder, 1998; Norris, 1999; Mather, 2001; Freedman, 2002). For all that, and in spite of the specificities mentioned above, the problem of “women in politics” received very little attention in the more specific study of French women in the European Parliament – except in very rare cases (Kauppi, 1999). Therefore, it is necessary to analyse these main issues in the context of certain questions: To what extent did the institutional rules governing European elections in France favour the promotion of women? Moreover, by extension, what are

<sup>1</sup> “Women don’t like confrontation as much as men – that’s the only real difference between them. Women prefer to find agreement, to discuss and find practical solutions” (cited by Vallance, Davies, 1986). On the study of the feminine art of politics see: Guionnet, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> The law on parity, which tends to promote equal access to electoral mandated and elected posts for men and women, has however not led to complete parity. The chief candidates were most often men (only 17 women in the 54 lists presented). Additionally, one or two resignations resulted in the election of men, thus changing the initial proportions. This was the case of Chantal Simonot, who resigned from the National Front (FN) list and was replaced by Fernand Rachine.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.observatoire-parite.gouv.fr/> accessed on 14 January 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Act 2000-493 of 6 June 2000, the law on parity, which tends to promote equal access to electoral mandates and elected posts for men and women, J.O n°131 of 7 June 2000, p. 8560.

<sup>5</sup> Figures provided in 2006 by the Parity Observatory, <http://www.observatoire-parite.gouv.fr/>. Concerning the place of women in French politics see, in particular, the works of Mariette Sineau, 2001.

the consequences on the work of European politicians?

Although it may be necessary to take into account the voting system, its effects can not be completely understood except in relation to the position of the European Parliament in the political field in France on the one hand; and, on the other hand, the very configuration of the social and political struggles that characterised French public life in the 1990s. It is within this framework that gender became a political resource more profitable to the European Parliament than to the French Parliament, resulting in the promotion of women who were new to politics. In effect, these women turned more towards forms of parliamentary “goodwill” and the strategy of over-involvement of roles in European politics. The relatively specific postures adopted by women within the institution are less about a hypothetical “feminine nature” than a set of socio-political processes that this article intends to reconstruct. In order to validate these hypotheses, we first conducted a quantitative survey on all MEPs elected in France between 1979 and 2004. In total, they numbered 369 people: 92 women and 277 men. We systematically coded their socio-demographic characteristics (age, sex, social status, level and type of education, father’s occupation), political characteristics (previous mandates, number of local and national mandates, length of career, age at first term, concurrent mandates) and various indicators of their involvement in the assembly (type of parliamentary committee, leadership position). This material is further complemented by data gathered and processed on sitting MEPs – elected in 2004 – and through more than a hundred interviews conducted between 1998 and 2007 with MEPs and their parliamentary aides.

Subsequently, this study will be separated into three parts: firstly, part 1 will focus on the characteristics of the political competition for the European mandate in France; secondly, part 2 will put into perspective gender as a specific political resource; and finally, part 3 will explain women’s involvement in the assembly with regard to their dispositions.

### **(1) Increased openness and heterodoxy of European political competition in France**

Several additional factors help explain the emergence of gender on the European political market (Beauvallet, Michon, 2008). The first of these factors is the voting system. However, by defining specific legal guidelines, more than prescribing political practices, it contributes to establish specific structures of constraints and opportunities which in turn influence the strategies deployed by the actors. Although the voting system offers a range of possibilities, it is not a sufficient explanation for the modalities of recruitment within Europe and its increased openness. In addition to the voting system, there is the influence of the European Parliament’s position in the French political field, and of the current political situation.

#### **The voting system and the position of the European Parliament in the French political field**

The characteristics of the European voting system in France and the specificities linked to the position of the parliamentary space in the arenas of politics or media primarily interact to provide political recruitment within Europe with a more open character than on the national markets. The criteria for political selection therein can be partially modified.

Regarding the voting system in France until 2004, several factors contributed to bring about this openness. Within the parties, the proportional voting list primarily favours the expression of modes of legitimacy and the mobilisation of more diversified resources. At the same time, it underscores the role and weight of partisan administrative staff that are responsible for constituting the lists and, especially, distributing eligible positions. Whereas regional elections, with their list-based proportional voting system in the departmental constituency, favour departmental political administrative staff (Nay, 1998), the uniqueness of the electoral constituency European elections reinforces the importance of national partisan administrative staff. The latter settle internal exchanges and conflicts over eligible positions that characterise pre-election periods. Thirdly, in the absence of a run-off, the principle of pure proportional representation and the relatively low threshold for the acquisition of seats, which also governs the process of state sponsorship of electoral campaigns (5%), are factors that encourage more marginal political competitors to enter the electoral battle, thus engendering the proliferation of lists. As a result of the greater number of candidates, competition between organisations is intensified, given that the minor lists apply greater pressure on the dominant political organisations.

Apart from existing electoral rules, the political recruitment system made explicit in European politics also presupposes consideration for the effects linked to the position of the European Parliament in the French political configuration. This relatively recent institution was, for many years, seen as peripheral in the French political field. While benefiting from a certain degree of prestige due to its international nature, it is still considered to be an essentially “technical” entity that is not political enough, i.e., “cut off” from

citizens and even “without real political power”. Its very principle contradicts the most sacred of political conceptions: those that associate every notion of representation with a national framework, with which the Parliament of Strasbourg is inevitably out of step. These two types of distance from the centre, both political and geographical, have generated ambiguous reports from politicians and journalists in the past.

These relations are typical of an institution that has very little political legitimacy. Although for “end-of-career” elected representatives it is a prestigious institution (precisely because it is international and therefore remote), more “settled” political players despise it to the extent that they sometimes even decline to run as candidates. When they do, they resign before the end of their term, or hold the parliamentary seat concurrently with another political mandate and/or to compensate for their relative past failures in the national political field. For example, 30% of the MEPs elected in France between 1979 and 2004 resigned before the end of their mandate,<sup>6</sup> while 70% held another mandate simultaneously. For many years, the position of a MEP was considered to be a temporary and unstable one, an interim post or end-of-career mandate. It is in this context of relative disaffection for the national political elite that EP positions came to be seen as an alternative point of access to a career in politics. Indeed, it was seen as an alternative space by many actors for whom

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<sup>6</sup> Apart from the practice of the ‘revolving door’ (i.e., MEPs resigning halfway through their mandate in order to make room for their successors on the list), which characterised RPR (former UMP) parliamentarians in the first legislature and the Greens in the third, it is especially representatives elected as deputies (Lienemann, Novelli) or senators (Karoutchi, Raffarin), or those with a ministerial portfolio (Fontaine, Saïfi) who exit the Parliament.

the opportunity to hold more mainstream positions at local and national levels had been compromised, owing to implicit norms and the strong restrictive effects which characterise selection to political office at the various levels. From the 1990s, MEPs were, *de facto*, younger, more endowed in terms of political resources, more often present, more active, more “professional”, and there had been a higher proportion of women (Beauvallet, 2007). They contributed to institutionalise the mandate, to differentiate between European and national paths, and to redefine the modalities under which it is exercised. It is therefore not surprising that in France, as in other European countries, the major names in the European Parliament are elected representatives who are little known in the political arenas of their countries (P. Bérès, J-L. Bourlanges, J. Daul, N. Fontaine, N. Pery).

The circular effect produced by a decentred political position and unfavourable subjective appreciations from major political actors, as well as from media and academic circles, made voting practices in European elections quite specific (Reif, Schmitt, 1980). Votes in European elections are more fragmented than the “primaries” whose issues are the most central positions of the field, i.e., those leading to the formation of “a true government”. Although the rate of abstention is high in European elections, they regularly produce new party lists and political organisations which generally do not perform) as well in the French parliamentary and presidential elections, for example, the ‘national sovereignty’ parties like those of Philippe de Villiers and Charles Pasqua, or the right-wing party *Chasse, Pêche, Nature et Tradition* (CPNT) (Hunting, Fishing, Nature and Tradition). However, in certain cases, European elections constituted one of the first steps to institutionalising new movements or parties like the National

Front (FN) or the Greens. These parties are partly made up of newcomers to the French political scene who are often portrayed as emerging from “civil society”, as opposed to a compartmentalised political arena. Given that it is sometimes difficult to draw a line between political organisation and interest group, as in the case of CPNT, these “small” lists have contributed to the emergence of new issues on the political arena, including feminisation.

In comparison with the logic that governs the national markets, the politically peripheral nature of the EP translates into the more heterodox nature of political competition – given that the latter appears to be more open, more receptive to the various issues of the French public domain – and into political recruitment that is more open or, arguably, less closed. This was especially relevant during the 1990s as there was renewed interest in the theme of gender equality in the public domain, and women, among others, were the first beneficiaries of this openness in terms of recruitment into European politics.

### **Concrete recruitment rules and practices**

These different characteristics of the European political market also encourage parties to respect a balance that is supposed to define the modalities governing the allocation of eligible positions on electoral lists; but which themselves depend on the general configuration of struggles that characterise partisan spaces, or the political field more generally (Nay, 1998).

Referring to the partially rewritten norms governing access to elective positions, the definition of this balance initially aimed at regulating the internal tensions within the parties. They also help political leaders stay directly in tune with issues in the public and political domains (e.g., “better social representativeness”, “balance

between cultural identities”), either because they consider these issues as constraints which need to be addressed especially as, in their opinion, they cannot be addressed in the framework of standard elections; or because they identify these issues with electoral opportunity, with occasions for presenting a more diversified political supply that is better adjusted to more fragmented electoral behaviours. Finally, by defining new norms, this balance defines new opportunities and leads to the development of new political resources, sometimes in way that contrasts with the prevailing situation in other political markets.

Three major types of balance can be identified in the case of European elections, the first of which serves internal purposes. In the framework of a single national constituency (in existence until 2004), its purpose was to regulate the tensions created by various territorial or political legitimacies. The list must display a balanced representativeness of the political regions and movements that make up the party or coalition of parties. The second type of balance seeks to moderate “incoming” and “outgoing” MEPs. Although the legitimacy of incumbent MEPs rarely conferred a tacit right to renewal of mandate (unlike the situation with parliamentary elections), the latter tend to be progressively accepted.<sup>7</sup> The major partisan organisations are increasingly concerned about balancing “incoming” and “outgoing” parliamentarians, thus displaying a form of “Europeanisation” of the implicit rules or norms of accession to the mandate. The third type of balance is more directly related to the sociological issues which

occur outside of the internal party games. This was primarily the case of a regular practice that was aimed at reserving eligible positions for people seen as “socio-professionals”. What was supposed to be a voluntarist practice of openness towards “civil society” became a feature of all lists, more specifically, of small lists, incoming or protest lists. For example, they were evident on the list presented by Philippe de Villiers in 1994, and on that of the Communist Party in 1999.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, there is the case of the attention given to representation by groups considered as ethnic minorities. Although this concern was emphasised in the case of Britain (Norris, Lovenduski, 1995), it bears a resemblance to the practices of political actors during European and municipal elections in France as well – even though the actors deny these practices.<sup>9</sup> Finally, this is evident in the practices associated with the concern for gender balance. Primarily characteristic of left-wing parties, these practices have been spreading after 1994 in a very specific context.

Concerning the inevitable opening-up to “visible minorities”, the affirmation of this balance of gender in the constitution of European lists can be understood in reference to the emergence (or resurgence) of a “problem” in the 1990s: a new issue to which the specific structure of the European political market will provide answers; and to whose affirmation it equally continued to contribute until the final vote on the Law of June 2000 (which made gender parity compulsory in political elections). The debate over parity that raged in France in the 1990s must be

<sup>7</sup> Within the French delegation, 36% of MEPs in the fourth legislature (1994-1999) have had already been elected to the European Parliament, 40% of those of the fifth legislature (1999-2004), and in the last European elections in 2004, 48% of elected representatives were incumbent.

<sup>8</sup> Examples include: the entrepreneur J. Goldsmith; Judge Jean-Pierre on the de Villiers list in 1994; the philosopher G. Fraisse; and the former president of SOS Racisme, F. Sylla on the Hue list in 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the French republican integration model often hides the ethnicisation practices of the political corps (Geisser, 1997).

considered in light of the return of the feminist question after its decline in the 1980s (Achin, Lévêque, 2000), which particularly questions the representativeness of social and political elites.<sup>10</sup> Linked to the position of the European Parliament in the French political arena and to the existing voting system, the heterodox customs of election constructed by organisations – aspirants to the political market – participated in placing this new issue on the political agenda. In this regard, as from 1989, parity became another dimension of the political choice proposed by the Greens. The party adopted the rule during elections, in which they were highly visible, and finished by winning their first major seats. Marginalised and subjected to competition by the charismatic list of Bernard Tapie, and forced into practices likely to remobilise its potential electorate, the Socialist Party, then led by Michel Rocard, also adopted the parity rule in 1994. Since then, feminisation in the left-wing parties in European elections is understood to be the unwritten rule of political recruitment to the European Parliament. After that election, and particularly after 1999, feminisation of European lists became a political issue, with organisations basically obliged to develop a specific choice in this respect, and to demonstrate their ability to feminise their lists. In fact, after 1999, parity became a near-systematic constraint, and most parties anticipated that the Law of June 2000 would make these practices compulsory. At the risk of being considered as averse to any form of modernity and the new standards of gender equality in politics, all organisations strive to ensure better representation of women on party lists. This new rule helped in the emergence of a new structure of constraints and opportunities, which partially modified earlier recruitment

<sup>10</sup> The increasing number of works in recent years on the place of women in politics - both in French and English literature - attests to this.

practices (Latté, 2002). For some organisations (FN, CPNT, the lists of Charles Pasqua and Philippe de Villiers), this constraint may turn out to be particularly difficult to manage.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the ability to feminise political personnel remains a crucial precondition for full inclusion in the 'game', not just in financial matters. This seems to be a new norm for political competition, as CPNT parliamentarian, Michel Raymond, fully expresses, insisting on his party's ability to comply with the new constraints in the 2002 parliamentary elections.

*"We'll probably try to cover as many constituencies as possible, 400 to 500 probably, and we'll do that with parity, too. We have a macho image... that's it, we'll ensure parity. We'll be the only ones practising parity, with the Greens, by the way. The other political parties have declared they would not go with parity; François Hollande called a press conference... Because non-compliance with parity in legislative elections attracts financial sanctions and as the money they receive is already... They'd rather tighten their belt than practise parity which they approved and demanded. Now, there is going to be a huge fight over that (...) and then, it's a way of making people see... Me, I am against parity, my colleague and I we're against, I can't understand how they can impose parity but rules are rules and since there is a rule, we'll obey it to the fullest extent... Good, we'll show we can do it (...). At last, we'll do it to prove... to send a strong signal to the outside"* (Interview with Michel Raymond, September 2001).

Although the voting system is a factor to be taken into consideration in studying the feminisation of the French delegation to the European Parliament, its importance is dependent on several other factors, namely, the rather peripheral position of the European Parliament in French politics,

<sup>11</sup> These party lists had the lowest number of women in 1999.



and the general emergence of “parity” as an issue in the public space. Subsequently, it is necessary to specify the consequences of this process for the characteristics of parliamentarians and the exercise of the mandate.

## (2) Is gender a political resource?

The feminisation of European political personnel, not only in France but in other countries as well, originally began with the left-wing parties (Norris, Franklin, 1997, p. 193). In 1979, women made up 22% of the socialist and communist component of the French delegation. The initial rate of feminisation of personnel of the Greens, the Socialist Party and the French Communist party has continued to increase: 26.5% in 1984; 32% in 1989; 42% in 1994; and 49% in 1999. Four out of the five parliamentarians elected on the LO-LCR<sup>12</sup> list were women. On the other hand, feminisation of political personnel of right-wing parties occurred later and randomly. From 18% in the first legislature, it fell to 14.5% in the second, and then as low as 12% in the third legislature. It rose again in 1994 (16%), and reached 31% between 1999 and 2004, thus gradually catching up with the levels that are characteristic of the left. In contrast with the traditionally low numbers of women in French political institutions, the high proportion of women elected to the European Parliament calls into question the mechanisms for selecting and recruiting French representatives to the European Parliament. Unlike other assemblies, gender constitutes a positive and distinctive attribute in the European Parliament. Younger than their male counterparts and less endowed with social

resources, women representatives in the European Parliament also have fewer political mandates, especially the most legitimate ones.

### Younger and socio-culturally less endowed women

Women were first of all younger than their male counterparts (table 1). This phenomenon was observed during the third legislature. In fact, the advent of younger women participated in the rejuvenation of French representatives. Not only are there more women in the left but they are also younger than women in the right (table 2). While less than one in ten women left-wing representatives is over the age of sixty, the figure for their right-wing counterparts is nearly four in ten.

Given their socio-cultural attributes – the second set of indicators – European women representatives largely belong to the upper segments of the social spectrum, which is no different from the men and typical of all MEPs as well as national political elites. However, through their social attributes, women are better represented than their male counterparts in the recent cultural fractions of the upper categories. They often have fewer university graduates (6.5% against 12.5% for men), fewer company directors (1% against 10%) fewer senior civil servants (5.5% against 18.5%). On the other hand, they are more often senior executives in civil service (6.5% against 3%), secondary school teachers (11% against 6.5%), school teachers or educators (6.5% against 1.5%). Moreover, although outnumbered by men, women have a higher representation in the intermediary and working-class social categories (13% against 6% and 7.5% against 4.5% respectively); especially middle-level executives, white-collar and blue-collar workers (table 3).

<sup>12</sup> The LO & LCR, respectively: *Lutte ouvrière* [Workers’ Struggle]; *Ligue communiste révolutionnaire* [Revolutionary Communist League]. Both ran as joint candidates in the 2004 regional and European elections.

Partisan differences, which are significant, confirm the classic logic of political recruitment for women (Gaxie, 1980) – obviously femininity does not hide the social cleavages within the political spectrum. Women recruited on left-wing lists are very often from the public sector and from the upper categories, dominated by intellectual professions, such as academics (10% of left-wing parliamentarians against 2.5% in the right), secondary school teachers (16% against 5%), schoolteachers or educators (10% against 2.5%). It is also the left that has the highest proportion of parliamentarians from the lower stratum of the social sphere (12% against 2.5%). This observation largely applies to men (tables 3 and 4).

A close look at educational careers and qualifications leads to similar conclusions: French women elected to the European Parliament are less endowed than their male colleagues in terms of education. For example, fewer women are graduates of either IEPs (Institutes of Political Science) (12% against 22.5%), or higher education institutes (15% against 31%), or the prestigious *Ecole Nationale d'administration* (ENA) (3% against 10%, see table 7). Although a high proportion of women certainly possess a university education, they are still less endowed in terms of educational capital. Fewer women hold a doctorate degree (17% against 22% for men) or a postgraduate certificate (38.5% against 55%); while a higher proportion of women are first degree holders (32% against 21.5%). Clearly, there is a strong contingent of secondary school teachers in Socialist Party and among the Greens.

The distribution of social and educational properties between left-wing and right-wing parliamentarians also appears mixed. Indeed, right-wing female MEPs – like their male counterparts – have less educational capital (33% hold a

postgraduate certificate against 44% of left-wing parliamentarians; 12% and 22% respectively have a doctorate degree, see table 4). In relation to the economic realm, they build their political careers by re-deployment of local notabilities. On the other hand, although left-wing female parliamentarians appear to be lower on the social hierarchy from an economic point of view, it is obvious that their social and political careers are built mostly by making use of their educational capital (30% of them have been teachers against 10% of their right-wing counterparts; 35% and 11% respectively for men, see table 3).

### Politically less endowed women

Political paths are also split along gender lines. According to a number published works, French women elected to the European Parliament have turned out to be less endowed with symbolic properties (only 30% of women have at least one publication to their name against 43% of men), international decorations (4% against 12%), national decorations (17% against 32%), sector-specific decorations such as academic prizes, or the Agriculture Award (11.5% against 31%). Judging by the right-left axis, left-wing female parliamentarians are more prolific in terms of publications than their right-wing counterparts. On the other hand, the latter are often more decorated (32% of right-wing female parliamentarians have one national decoration against 6% of their left-wing counterparts).

Women also possess less political capital, as shown by the elective mandate indicators (table 8). Upon their entry into the EP, the political careers of women, both at national and local levels, are shorter than those of men (4% of female parliamentarians have a national career spanning more than 15 years against 19% of male parliamentarians; while 15% of women have a local career spanning more

than 15 years against 28% of men). Fewer women have held government positions (14% against 20% of their male colleagues), national mandates (81% of them have had no mandate against 55% of men), local mandates (37% have never held a local mandate against 30% of men), whether as general councillor (17% against 35%) or president of a regional or general council (2% against 10%), or mayor (11.5% against 33%). However, the gaps between men and women either open or close towards the bottom of the mandate hierarchy – 29.5% of women have been regional councillors against 42.5% of men; 44.5% of women have been municipal councillors or deputy mayor against 33.5% of men; while 10% have been substitute parliamentarians against 7.5%. The mode of career entry confirms the lower level of political capital. The late entry of women into politics (4% of them file for their first candidacy before 30 years against 15% of men; 40% are elected to their first mandate before the age of 40 against 54%) usually follows a tenure in the political system (34% against 27.5% of men), rather than a term in a politico-administrative cabinet (especially ministerial) (14% against 17%). For 12% of women, the European mandate is their inaugural political experience against 5% of men.

Another example of the left-right divide is that right-wing female representatives have more often been ministers (19% against 10% in the left) or parliamentarians (19% against 12.5%), although they have less often been mayors (7% against 16%). Female representatives from the left have more often held their first political office in a party (50% against 17% on the right), while those on the right instead began as a MEP (19% against 6%). Once again, the numbers are similar for men (table 5). Finally, left-wing female parliamentarians are more prolific in terms of publications than their counterparts on the right. On the other hand, the latter have more often been

decorated (32% of women on the right have national decorations against 6% on the left).

The distribution of previous mandates, modalities for entering the political career and symbolic properties are indicative of differentiation based on the gender of parliamentarians with women being less endowed with political capital. For women, the European mandate is more often an opportunity for political professionalisation. More specifically, being a woman on the left very often goes with educational resources and a career in a party while on the right, being a woman goes with resources acquired in political competitions, often in the shadows of local and national leaders. However, these gaps are equally found, for the most part, in the case of men.

### **(3) Dispositions to work in the European Parliament**

An *in situ* observation of incumbent female MEPs extends the earlier reflection on the modalities of their election, and emphasises the social logic that underpins the exercise of the mandate and the construction of European parliamentary roles.

A study of the overall practices initially shows that gender is of little relevance when it comes to attaining internal achievements of the institution. The promotion of gender on the European political market therefore in part stems from its manipulation by partisan organisations for electoral purposes. Based on seniority, access to leadership positions (e.g., the presidency, vice-presidency of committees and groups, or membership in the European Parliament bureau) and presentation of parliamentary reports vary significantly according to gender. Out of the 78 French MEPs elected in 2004, our

study shows that 33% of men have been in leadership positions against 18% of women; and, between June 2004 and July 2007, men presented an average of 2.3 parliamentary reports against 1.9 for women, equal seniority notwithstanding (2.0 mandates). These internal variations illustrate the limits of legislative action in terms of promoting gender equality on all levels of political action.

Although these gaps are the result of persistent gender inequality, they are nonetheless also attributable to the differential distribution of political capital between men and women (*cf.* above). In fact, the mode of involvement and the modalities of appropriation of the mandate are far from uniform, given that they vary widely depending on the social and political characteristics of female parliamentarians. Thus, female parliamentarians whose political paths lead directly to the centre of the political field (former ministers or national parliamentarians, who are considered, and think of themselves first and foremost as “national” representatives) and who generally seek a long-term position either in the National Assembly or in the government invest little into the European Parliament. For them, it is specifically a secondary arena (Michèle Alliot-Marie, Roselyne Bachelot, and Elisabeth Guigou). In these cases, the European mandate is generally short, ranging from a few months to a few years, with frequent resignations owing either to changeovers between parties or parliamentary elections. Their actual presence in the European Parliament is also more sporadic, given that parliamentary activity often essentially consists of voting during plenary sessions. The actual practices of these female MEPs thus tend to point towards forms of amateurism that are often condemned by the more engaged women parliamentarians. On the whole, similar observations have been made about men.

A different attitude is exhibited by female MEPs who, like Catherine Lalumière or Simone Veil, are equally endowed with political capital but are either in the twilight of their career, or have been marginalised by national institutions. Their positions in the assembly are linked to a symbolic capital that is specific to men and women who dominate and who have nothing to prove in order to exist or be recognised. This is all the more true when a European experience - such as European Commissioner, or, as in the case of Lalumière, Secretary-General of the Council of Europe – complements the political capital acquired on the national field. In such cases, the postures adopted are not far removed from positions whose only real symbolism is the story they are meant to tell.

However, these are not the most characteristic postures of female MEPs. Indeed, a study of the modes of recruiting French women politicians into the European Parliament shows a relative weakness of their social, cultural (especially educational), as well as political resources, which differentiates them from their male counterparts. The over-involvement in roles can therefore be a strategy to compensate for a less favourable parliamentary and European resource structure and political legitimacy. These women (Aline Paillet, Françoise Grossetête, Marie-Claude Vayssade) are characterised by a disposition of “goodwill” towards the institution and its prescribed roles. Less endowed with political properties, and less prepared by their political and social careers to deal with the functioning of political spaces and to master the expertise of “professionals of representation”, many female MEPs present themselves as “assiduous, industrious” or “studious” workers. They frequently highlight the “time-consuming

nature of their work”, as the following example indicates:

*“When you come here, you have lots of things to discover. Don’t come here thinking you’ll know everything in just one day. And you have to assert yourself, the French are not known for hard work, and so you have to assert yourself through hard work. Here, you’ll have no problems if you work (...). I have worked really hard. No doubt about it. But I love my work. I never rest, I don’t stop; I work all the time.”*<sup>13</sup>

This kind of involvement of MEPs can be seen in various areas depending on their personal or political interests in various committees. This is because these forms of dedication to the institution and over-involvement in roles on the part of newcomers to the political scene provide the opportunity to strengthen a sometimes fragile legitimacy, with the possibility of recognition leading to leadership positions (e.g., the group vice-presidency held by Grossetête before 2004, or the EP presidency held by Fontaine during the fifth legislature). These forms of dedication also afford true political credit, i.e., capital that is specific to the European Parliament, and is potentially transferable into the national political field – if only to the extent that it contributes to the renewal of the mandate. Consequently, the European parliamentary space can provide viable alternative paths to political professionalisation, since resources acquired in the institution turn out to be useful in partisan contexts. In this regard, if one goes beyond ideologically negative opinions – characteristic, for example, of far left-wing female MEPs whose refusal to engage in the parliamentary game constitutes a type of management of the mandate and of the constraints of representation – subjective relationships to the institution are usually positive, since they are embedded in ascendant political

and social paths, and in the considerable symbolic and financial rewards provided by the EP’s privileged position on the periphery of the political arena.

Hence, the political approach of many women appears entrepreneurial regarding social spheres beyond the political arena, as well as the Parliament, where involvements are strong and mainly directed towards secondary or less legitimate committees, which can however still yield high political dividends. Between 1979 and 2004, French female MEPs were, *de facto*, more frequently found on less prestigious committees, such as: Environment, Internal Market and especially Employment and Social Affairs (14% against 3.5% for men) or Culture and Education (11% against 4%).<sup>14</sup> However, in correlation to the emergence of a European space of public policies, the succession of treaties and the appearance of new legislative procedures, the position of the EP in European policy-making has strengthened (Costa, 2001). Consequently, some of these committees (Environment, Industry, Budgetary Control and Internal Market) help to reinvest intellectual resources and aptitudes for the work. This is due to the fact that, although they are at the very core of the institution’s strategies – in terms of the actual configuration of the European political system – they enable them to monitor issues, and to draft highly “technical” reports which have become increasingly prestigious from the late 1980s. As a result of the procedures of codecision or the centralisation of issues linked to the budget, these committees and the topics they deal with are indeed at the heart of institutional issues.<sup>15</sup> The EP’s ability to produce technical expertise able

<sup>13</sup> Interview with a female MEP, quoted by Akrivou and Lyose, 1998.

<sup>14</sup> This is typical of practices characteristic of other political assemblies. See: Achin, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> See Georgakakis, 2000, on the standing of the EP and the Budget Control Committee during the crisis of the Commission in 1998-1999.

to rival that of the Commission's in presumably less political but highly technical areas, is in fact at the heart of institutional strategies. In the same vein, the deepening of European construction from 1986, and especially in 1992, some real opportunities for acquiring a new type of political capital emerged for the actors who were socially and politically disposed to "play the game" and to be highly involved – among whom, in particular, there were many women. Consequently, the history of the institution cannot be entirely separated from this fusion between, on the one hand, relatively unexpected political paths in a parliamentary level institution with a long-standing deficit of legitimacy, and, on the other hand, very specific legal procedures (Beauvallet, 2007).

The parliamentary practices of female MEPs can therefore not be understood without taking into account their social and political properties. More than just a characteristic of political femininity, as suggested in certain quarters, the forms of involvement in Europe must be considered especially in relation to the specificities of the political recruitment of women MEPs. These specificities produce processes that are similar for men and women, but are amplified in the case of the latter.

## Conclusion

The voting system for European elections in France up until 2004 – the single constituency, proportional list system – has undoubtedly led to an increased openness for the recruitment of women into politics. This constitutes a key variable in the process. However, the survey demonstrated that it can only be understood in combination with the position of the European Parliament in the French political field, the inter- and intra-partisan struggles to change the rules of

political recruitment; or, furthermore, the issues in the public space at a given moment. In France, the feminisation of the European political personnel is the result of the special uses made by political actors in European elections (especially in left-wing parties). These specific uses only make sense in the context of wider games within which they are involved. By using feminisation as a means for singling out the electoral supply – a strategy that was itself made possible by the special structure of these elections – as well as, within the same parties, as a means for distinguishing rival aspirants, all actors facilitated the transformation of the norms of political selection, and contributed to the emergence of new resources, which are particularly efficient for party list systems.

However, if the opening of a new European space for political competition contributed to change the rules of the entire political field, this re-definition ultimately remained incomplete as the low representation of women in the upper echelons of the political hierarchy shows, even after the law on parity was passed. In other words, changing the rules of the political game is more likely to affect the periphery of the field than the centre.

At the European level, the opening of political liberalisation in favour of women resulted in the introduction of women with less political experience. This dimension therefore affects the transformation of the political relationship with the European mandate, the manner it is perceived and embodied both inside and outside the assembly. Formerly considered as "secondary", the European mandate has progressively established itself as one of primary status, which entails a certain implied political "goodwill". Furthermore, being less endowed with political capital, women who wish to remain in the European Parliament are thus more often dependent on parties and political leaders.

## Tables & Figures

**Table 1: Age distribution by gender and legislature of MEPs elected in France between 1979 and 2004.**

Legislature	Sex	<40 years	40-49 years	50-59 years ns	>60 years	Total
First (1979-1984)	Men	4.4%	16.7%	32.2%	46.7%	100% (90)
	Women	21.7%	21.7%	30.4%	26.1%	100% (23)
Second (1984-1989)	Men	6.0%	28.6%	28.6%	36.9%	100% (84)
	Women	5.3%	47.4%	10.5%	36.8%	100% (19)
Third (1989-1994)	Men	3.6%	41.0%	32.5%	22.9%	100% (83)
	Women	14.3%	57.1%	23.8%	4.8%	100% (21)
Fourth (1994-1999)	Men	2.6%	27.3%	48.1%	22.1%	100% (77)
	Women	3.4%	37.9%	48.3%	10.3%	100% (29)
Fifth (1999-2004)	Men	3.4%	19.0%	56.9%	20.7%	100% (58)
	Women	4.9%	29.3%	51.2%	14.6%	100% (41)

**Table 2: Age distribution by political affiliation of MEPs elected in France between 1979 and 2004.**

	<40 yrs	40-50 yrs	50-60 yrs	>60 yrs	Total
Right	8% (4)	40% (20)	44% (22)	8% (4)	100% (50)
Left	5% (2)	26% (11)	31% (13)	38% (16)	100% (42)
All	6.5% (6)	33.5% (31)	38% (35)	21% (20)	100% (92)

**Table 3: Distribution of original profession of MEPs elected in France between 1979 and 2004 by gender and political affiliation.**

Profession	Women						Men					
	Left		Right		All		Left		Right		All	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Farmer	0	0%	2	5%	2	2%	5	5%	12	7%	17	6%
Company director	0	0%	1	2.5%	1	1%	5	5%	23	14%	28	10%
Liberal profession	4	8%	3	7%	7	7.5%	15	14%	21	12%	36	13%
Private sector senior executive	3	6%	6	14%	9	10%	8	7%	21	12%	29	10,5%
Senior civil servant	2	4%	3	7%	5	5.5%	9	8%	42	25%	51	18.5%
Academic	5	10%	1	2.5%	6	6.5%	24	22%	10	6%	34	12.5%
Public sector senior executive	5	10%	1	2.5%	6	6.5%	3	3%	5	3%	8	3%
Secondary school teacher	8	16%	2	5%	10	11%	11	10%	7	4%	18	6.5%
Journalist	4	8%	4	9.5%	8	8.5%	9	8%	7	4%	16	6%
Artisan/trader	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	5	3%	5	2%
Private sector middle-level executive	1	2%	3	7%	4	4.5%	0	0%	4	2%	4	1.5%
Public sector middle-level executive	1	2%	0	0%	1	1%	1	1%	1	1%	2	0.5%
Schoolteacher	5	10%	1	2.5%	6	6.5%	3	3%	1	1%	4	1.5%
Paramedical (nurse...)	0	0%	1	2.5%	1	1%	1	1%	0	0%	1	0.5%
White/blue collar worker	6	12%	1	2.5%	7	7.5%	9	8%	3	2%	12	4.5%
Without profession	1	2%	1	2.5%	2	2.1%	1	1%	1	1%	2	0.5%
Non Applicable	5	10%	12	28%	17	18.5%	5	4%	5	3%	10	3%
All	50	100%	42	100%	92	100%	109	100%	168	100%	277	100%



**Table 4: Social status indicator distribution by gender and political affiliation of MEPs elected in France between 1979 and 2004 (n=369).**

	Women			Men		
	Left (50)	Right (42)	All (92)	Left (109)	Right (168)	All (277)
Originally working in the private sector	38% (19)	48% (20)	42% (39)	42% (46)	56% (95)	51% (141)
Originally from working class	12% (6)	2.5% (1)	8% (7)	8% (9)	1% (2)	4% (11)
Post-graduate certificate	44% (22)	33% (14)	39% (36)	61% (66)	51% (85)	55% (151)
Doctorate degree	22% (11)	12% (5)	17% (16)	33% (36)	15% (25)	22% (61)

**Table 5: Political path indicators of MEPs elected in France between 1979 and 2004 by gender and political affiliation.**

	Women			Men		
	Left (50)	Right (42)	All (92)	Left (109)	Right (168)	All (277)
Minister	10% (5)	19% (8)	14% (13)	15% (17)	23% (39)	20% (56)
Parliamentarian	12% (6)	19% (8)	15% (14)	36% (39)	46% (77)	42% (116)
Regional councillor	24% (12)	33% (14)	28% (26)	38% (41)	45% (76)	42% (117)
General councillor	14% (7)	21,5% (9)	17% (16)	31% (34)	38% (63)	35% (97)
Mayor	16% (8)	7% (3)	12% (11)	30% (33)	35% (59)	33% (92)
First political appointment	49% (24)	17% (7)	23% (21)	41% (44)	19% (32)	27% (76)
First political appointment and mandate as MEP	6% (3)	19% (8)	12% (11)	2% (2)	8% (13)	5% (15)
First appointment in a political/administrative cabinet	10% (5)	19% (8)	14% (13)	11% (12)	20% (34)	17% (46)

**Table 6: Gender distribution of MEPs elected in France between 1979 and 2004 (n=369) by legislature.**

Legislature	1979-1984	1984-1989	1989-1994	1994-1999	1999-2004
Men	77,5%	81%	77%	73%	59%
Women	22,5%	19%	23%	27%	41%

**Table 7: Variations by gender in educational properties of MEPs elected in France between 1979 and 2004 (n=369).**

	IEP	Graduate school	Doctorate	5 years of higher education	3-4 years of higher education
Men	22,5%	31%	22%	55%	21,5%
Women	12%	15%	17%	38,5%	31%

**Table 8: Variations by gender in the mandates held by MEPs elected in France between 1979 and 2004, before their election to the European Parliament.**

	Minister	Deputy	Mayor	General councillor	Regional councillor	Municipal councillor/deputy mayor	National + local
Men	20%	42%	33%	35%	42,5%	33,5%	39,5%
Women	14%	15%	11,5%	17%	29,5%	44,5%	16%

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