



The EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality

**Women in political
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Comments Paper – Austria



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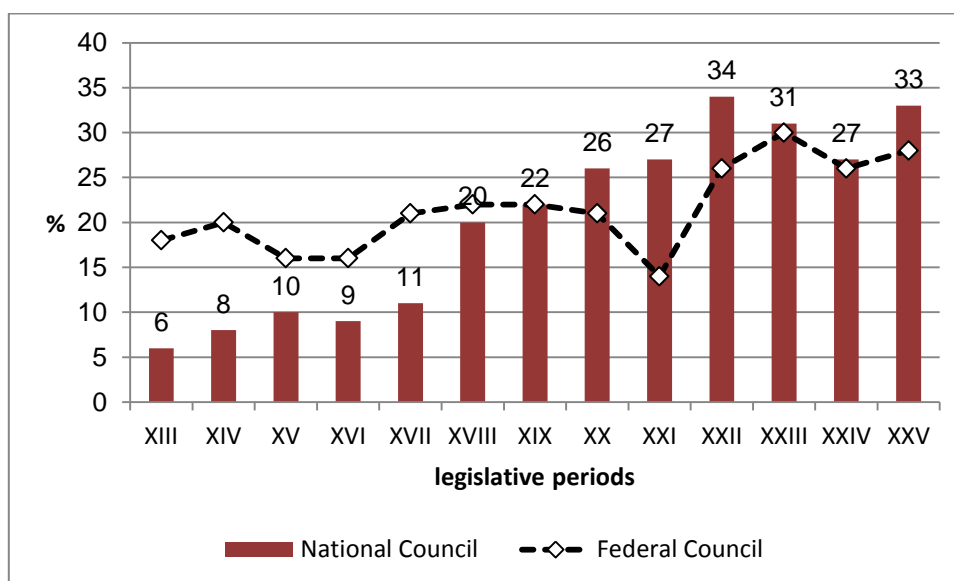
Women's political participation in Austria

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1. Female political representation in Austria

In Austria, women's political participation has exceeded the critical mass of 30 % regarded as the threshold for consolidation of fair gender representation in the National Council (the lower house of Parliament) already in 2002. But with 34 % or 62 women of 183 members of the National Council this was the highest proportion of women, followed by fluctuations afterwards. Currently 33 % of the members are women. In the Federal Council (the upper house of Parliament, the Bundesrat) the share of women is lower, with currently 17 women of 60 members (28 %).

Figure 1: Female representation in the National Council and the Federal Council between 1970 and 2013



Source: Website of the Austrian Parliament (May 2016)

In the longer perspective the situation in the Austrian National Council is characterised by an increasing share of women until the beginning of this century with no consistent trend in the following legislative periods. This goes along with fluctuating female members in the Federal Council, but also in national and local governments. Especially the local levels show high gender gaps:

- The national government reached its highest share of women in the government in 2007 with 40 %. It decreased in the following legislative periods (BMBF 2015). After the government reshuffle of spring 2016, only 25 % of the members are women. Austria never had a woman as Federal Chancellor or Federal President, although there was a female Vice Chancellor between 2000 and 2003 (FPÖ). In 2006 the first female Speaker of the National Council (SPÖ) was elected.

- The picture regarding women's participation in the regional parliaments varies between 22 % in Carinthia and 50 % in Tyrol without consistent trends (2013, OSCE 2014).
- Only 6 % of the 2,354 towns, cities and municipalities have a female mayor, the most of them in municipalities with a population up to 10,000 (Austrian Association of Municipalities, August 2015). The highest share of female politicians holds the European Level. In the European Parliament, 50 % of those elected in Austria are women.

Whilst Austria ranks relatively high at the European and the national level, it shows considerable deficits in the representation in local structures and municipalities. But in nearly all political bodies Austria is still far from the goal of the Council of Europe "of achieving gender balance in decision-making processes with the initial target of a critical mass of at least 40 % women in all governmental and elected bodies".

2. Background

The National Council, the lower house of Parliament (Nationalrat), has 183 members chosen through proportional representation at the district, state, and federal levels. Members serve five-year terms, extended from four in 2008. The president, who is elected for a six-year term, appoints the chancellor, who needs the support of the legislature to govern. The 62 members of the upper house, the Federal Council (Bundesrat), are chosen by state legislatures for five- or six-year terms.

The two governing parties (Social Democrats - SPÖ and Conservatives - ÖVP) restructured their government teams in the last months: One female minister (ÖVP) was replaced by a man. The changes in the SPÖ team did not result in changes of gender participation, but for the first time includes a Muslim woman as state secretary in the Federal Chancellery.

Although women are the largest "minority" in politics they are not the only ones. The participation of Slovene, Hungarian, and Roma minorities in local government remains limited despite governmental efforts to provide bilingual education, media, and access to federal funds. There is little minority representation in Parliament (Stöckl, Walter 2014). After the 2013 elections, the National Council included one Muslim man and three Turkish-born Muslim women.

3. Challenges and women's promotion in Austria

Austria has constitutional rights for women and men and a proportional representation election system, reckoned to provide fair gender opportunities. But as also the OSCE report on the parliamentary elections of 2013 noted, there are no special provisions to promote women candidates. Parties draw up candidate lists, which allow for preferential voting.

3.1. Political Culture

Women face a number of barriers in politics which are even more pronounced in local and regional levels. The major challenge to increase the low presence of

women in politics is seen in the political culture that contradicts to female roles according to the traditional gender division of labour. This is aggravated by the role of media who mostly pay more attention to appearance rather than to the content of a politician's message.

The lack of women's involvement in politics is considerably greater in local and regional levels and among young women. According to interviews with politicians, women seem to be less inclined on planning a career in politics than their male colleagues, but decide more spontaneously when asked first, rather than taking the initiative. The OSCE-report (2014) illustrates the obstacles of political participation of women in its practical realisation. Being a politician is not only a full time job but a way of life. Obligations for social events concern most political functions, so that little time is left for anything else. Both men and women are deterred by the unsocial hours and increased responsibilities, but women with young families can hardly manage this without vital support of relatives and networks.

It is also the image of the individual politician that affects women's participation in politics. Despite the negative image of politics, media enforce stereotypes of male and female politics. The under-representation of women in news media, the higher attention on appearance or emotions than on the content as well as the concentration of female sources to soft news topics, like family, lifestyle and culture may discourage women from political participation. The media landscape in Austria promotes such disincentives for women, because it is largely dominated by a few mass "boulevard" papers, with little quality press, as compared to other countries such as the UK, Germany or Switzerland (Steinmaurer 2012).

Last but not least, male dominated networks control the selection and mission processes. Networks are essential for reaching specific positions and party support. Men are not just more engaged in using those networks, many of them occur in male-dominated spheres like football-clubs or fraternities.

In order to reduce the gender gap especially on local levels and among young women, initiatives for female networking and mentoring have been implemented in Austria. Women's groups within parties and co-operations between parties support gender equality in politics. Initiatives at local levels support women in politics through initiatives such as organising regular meetings of female politicians in municipalities or workshops and courses on topics of daily political life (including e.g. media and politics, time management, how to manage emotional topics, local budgets, and much more). Many existing network groups offer assistance for women thinking in politics as a career, like Alphafrauen, Frauennetzwerk Medien, Österreichischer Frauenring. But none of them has enough power to reduce the gender gap in politics or to convince the gate-keepers of the importance of women's participation in politics.

3.2. Party Rules and Quotas

Most of the main Austrian parties have some kind of internal quota provision for the candidate lists, apart from the FPÖ:

- The Greens are the only party that has introduced "zipping" regulations for the lists at all levels for elections with quotas of 50 % women.
- The Social democrats (SPÖ) considers a female participation rate of 40 % and has zipping regulations for the party lists in its statute since 2010.

- The statute of the Conservative Party (ÖVP) from 1995 implies a quota 35 %. But these quotas are not always carried out consistently in practice, especially at local level.
- The Freedom Party (FPÖ) rejects quotas in principle.
- Smaller and newer parties seem to be more reluctant towards quotas, although they tend to be keen on experimenting with candidate hearings and primaries for elected office. E.g. the liberal Neos Party do not have quotas although there is an ongoing internal discussion.

The different shares of women between the parties tend to follow the existing quotas. In the election of the National Council the Greens reached 50 % women, SPÖ 37 %, ÖVP 28 %, FPÖ 18 % and the Neos 11 %. But it remains unclear, whether these results are directly linked to quotas or to more general attitudes towards women in politics. Experts note that internal party quotas at local level count for little, not to mention the objectives of gender balance (OSCE 2014).

Existing party rules and gender quotas as well as supporting measurements for women like mentoring or networking facilities could promote female politicians but face a number of hurdles.

In general, the existing Austrian quotas rely on voluntary regulations and sanctions are non-existent. Transparency in the formation of candidate lists is often lacking and the result of backroom deals. None of the parties has quotas for “newcomers”. Especially the replacement of politicians who exit their positions within legislative periods is in conflict with quotas. The male successors of female members of political bodies have been topic of public debates and female political movements in the last years, but without success. And of course getting women on candidate lists does not mean that they really get elected.

4. Transferability of Good practices of France and Slovenia

The experiences with voluntary quotas in Austria show that they are not effective without sanctions. With the weakening of the mainstream parties and their struggles for votes, gender equality goals have become less important. Therefore it has become a challenge to consolidate the cases where the critical mass of 30 % has already been achieved. Austria is far off from gender balanced political bodies, even more so than ten years ago.

Hence the good practices of France and Slovenia with their legal obligations for parties to increase the number of women in election processes would mean an improvement for gender equality in politics. The combination of gender quotas with zipping rules or binominal list systems and financial sanctions could encourage all parties to promote female candidates and might keep attention on female participation even in situations where fundamental problems have to be resolved in parties. The inclusion of local elections, which is explicitly addressed in France, might reduce the gender gaps in municipalities and local politics.

But legal quotas for women tend to be a controversial and emotional topic in Austrian politics - even though there is a tradition of regional quotas which are generally accepted and have never been questioned because of restrictions of the

autonomy of parties or of the qualification of candidates. Gender and politics receives attention in public debates, but still many question why there should be such a concentration on women's participation.

In the past, pressure from the EU was a helpful support for the promotion of gender equality in different fields. Therefore EU-standards for a legal framework to promote female candidates could overcome the resistance against quotas in politics or even in other professional or social areas. The political parties are the gatekeepers for greater representation and can do much to encourage or discourage women thinking of going into politics. But this has to be complemented by measures on political culture and capacity development for young female politicians.

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