Conclusions: Implications for Party Theory and Underrepresented Groups

At its core, this book concerns challenges from new contenders for voice within the party and in parliament by focusing on one group—women. Changes in women’s roles have been one of the fundamental social transformations across postindustrial democracies. The surge in women’s participation within parties called attention to women’s political voice and placed this issue squarely on the mainstream political agenda. Demands to alter the status quo threaten powerful interests within the party organization, and parties have been reluctant to meaningfully address this issue. Yet at various points over the past three decades, certain parties across Western Europe have focused attention on raising the number of women candidates. To be sure, it has been a contested process, full of debate and rancor. Women have not only challenged party organizations for greater voice in party politics, but also, in some cases, ultimately changed the party rules and transformed the face of parliament.

Chapter 1 began by arguing that parties have been given short shrift in many previous systematic, cross-national studies of women in parliament. As gatekeepers to parliamentary office in Western Europe, parties can promote or hinder women’s efforts. From the perspective of how new challengers find access in democratic party systems, I asked how the political and institutional structures within parties facilitate women’s access. From the perspective of party change, I asked why some political parties took steps to promote women
candidates while others did not, and why they did so at the time they did. These questions were considered by assembling an extensive body of evidence from published statistics, opinion surveys, and interviews with party officials and politicians. Drawing together the findings from the systematic multivariate analysis and the in-depth case studies, this chapter connects those findings to the larger theoretical implications. This chapter begins with the three case study nations, identifying the key forces behind the motivations of party elites to initiate party-led campaigns to promote women candidates for office. In the final section, these forces are tied to the strongest explanations found in the statistical analyses.

**Party Change in Britain, Germany, and Finland**

The case studies generate important insights into women in party politics. Some of these insights reinforce the relationships yielded by the statistical analyses, and others are valuable because they tap forces that are not easily measured with quantitative data. In all three party systems, women’s mobilization was key to gaining party efforts to promote women within the party, and to support them for elected office. Women’s renewed claims on the party systems of these three countries brought the issue of women’s parliamentary presence onto the mainstream agenda and kept it there. Shifts in attitudes, women’s voting patterns, and women’s grassroots party activism explain why parties might have incentive to promote women candidates, but to a large extent, the varying strategies of women within parties explain why women made gains when they did.

First, the British and German case studies highlight the importance of changing party leaders’ perceptions. Electoral pressures generated by women’s shifting voting patterns alone are not sufficient to ignite change. Years of gaining more women’s votes brought little response from the British Labour and the German Social Democratic parties. The key to translating electoral shifts into women’s parliamentary gains was highlighting the value of women’s votes. In the German Social Democratic Party in the late 1980s, the British Labour Party in the early 1990s, and, to a lesser extent, the German CDU in the late 1990s, key women within the party appealed to the party leadership by framing women’s votes as part of a winning electoral strategy. Further, these women convinced party leaders to expect that more women’s votes might be gained if the party had more women MPs. British Labour’s quintessential “Winning Words” campaign was an unabashed strategic maneuver to win women’s votes by running women for office.

While extrapartisan activities are not the focus of this project, the renewal of the women’s movement serves as the backdrop for women’s participation in
party politics in all three cases. The case studies recount how the women’s movement infused parties with a new generation of women in party politics—a group with a common identity as women, and a concern for representation among the party ranks. Importantly, the timing of this shift toward party politics differs across the three cases. Finnish women entered parties full force in the 1960s, while German and British women’s movements focused more on protest activities until the late 1970s. As a result, Finnish women made inroads within parties much earlier, and this progress was reflected in the country’s position as a world leader in women in parliament in the 1960s.

The infusion of feminist women into the party women’s organizations of the British Labour Party and German Social Democratic Party in the 1970s injected the traditional party women’s organizations with a renewed politics. Yet selecting the right allies within the party is essential to making parliamentary gains. When the women’s organizations aligned with the more radical factions within the party, their success was limited. When the women’s organizations aligned with the up-and-coming faction of party “modernizers,” they made greater inroads. Party modernizers prized winning control of government, even if this goal meant more centrist policies. In other words, by framing women’s demands for office as part of the party’s plan for electoral success, women were often able to achieve their goals. A similar case was illustrated on the Right by the German Christian Democrats, where a group of young professional women led the traditional women’s organization to engage in power politics by aligning with the dominant party coalition for a short time.

As women gained positions of power within the party, they gained greater ability to transform party rules. In the British Labour Party, women made great strides on the national executive committee, and their lobbying efforts resulted in a quota-type policy for candidates. As a result of the new candidate selection rules, women’s presence in the party’s delegation to Parliament jumped from 14% in 1992 to 24% in 1997. The German SPD also adopted a series of quota policies in the late 1980s, culminating in the 1987 candidate gender quota that boosted women’s representation from 18% in the 1987 election to 27% in the 1990 election. Women in the highest echelons of the CDU lobbied Chancellor Helmut Kohl and won a quota-esque policy for women’s candidacies.

The Finnish case proved to be a bit of a contrast to the British and German cases and deserves some special consideration. Despite the absence of overt party efforts to promote women candidates, Finnish women made great gains in party politics and parliament in the 1960s. First and foremost, as in Britain and Germany, women’s activism in party politics was key to gaining access to the parliament. In addition, a predominant national ideology oriented toward women’s “equality,” rather than women’s difference, played an integral role in

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this process. The penchant for women across the ideological spectrum to favor mainstream party channels reduced the role of the women’s organizations within Finnish parties and reduced the need for special measures to support women. The early and full-force integration of the women’s movement into partisan channels precluded the aggressive challenges generated within the leftist parties of Britain and Germany. This process is supported by evidence from previous research on the opportunity structure for new social movements (NSMs) in Western Europe. Kriesi et al. (1992) conclude that states that use an inclusive strategy, or accommodate some NSM demands, tend to preempt protest activity. Here, the more inclusive Finnish parties preempted the more vociferous and organized claims for gender parity that emerged in other Western European parties.

Importantly, Finland’s unique electoral rules also clearly enhanced women’s progress. First, parties have a distinct incentive to include women on the list—to broaden the party’s appeal among women voters. Finnish women have turned out to vote at higher rates than their male counterparts since the 1970s (Sundberg, 1995a). And through the Finnish “logic of inclusion,” parties developed an early and enduring norm to balance the party list by including women. While women in other party-list, proportional representation systems were bound to “closed lists” and ranked toward the bottom by party officials, Finnish candidates receive individual preference votes. Finnish women avoided the trap of being ranked so low on the list that they could not be elected. And women voters were able to support women candidates. In essence, electoral rules in Finland did not present the same barriers that they did in other Western European nations. Because the barriers were lower, women in Finland made great strides early on and did not press for candidate quotas.

Challenging Parties and Recognizing Opportunity

Taken together, the statistical and case study findings show that women’s efforts interact with parties’ opportunity structures to shape the effectiveness of women’s demands for increased representation. The broader implications shed some light on how new contenders can best lobby party channels to gain access to parliament.

The case study evidence pointed toward the importance of the party women’s organizations in channeling and articulating women’s demands for greater representation. In addition, the multivariate models in chapter 8 showed that growing numbers of women among a party’s voters are linked to increases in their representation among a party’s delegation to parliament. Both influences depict a bottom-up flow of party change as they represent citizen-initiated pressures on the party.
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Party institutions condition the effectiveness of these bottom-up forces. Cross-national statistical analysis in chapter 3 shows that parties with New Left ideological values are more hospitable to women within the internal party ranks. Thus, women rise to top positions more quickly in parties with a standing commitment to new, noneconomic issues. Further, the case study evidence suggests that the leftist parties such as Labour, the Socialists, and the Greens have paid most attention to women’s demands for equality. In addition, women make greater gains in the hierarchy of permeable party structures. The statistical evidence in chapter 4 shows that more factionalized parties have more women on the top decision-making committees. Long-standing ties to outside groups may provide women more points of access and may establish a norm for incorporating new groups.

Women’s presence among the top party leadership strongly influences the statistical likelihood a party will adopt candidate gender quotas and will send more women to parliament. The case studies demonstrate that women in top party positions can highlight the problem of women’s underrepresentation and keep this issue on the party’s agenda. Specifically, as best illustrated by the British Labour Party, a few well-placed women who are interested in “letting the ladder down” to other women can be a catalyst for change. What is more, strategy in the form of timing and framing proved essential to making substantial gains. Women in powerful positions gain the ear of their counterparts, and they can convince the party leadership to listen to women’s claims for parity in parliament. These women may point out that rival parties are running more women, or that a deficit in women’s votes can be attributed to the party’s male-dominated image. Women in the party leadership shape party leaders’ perceptions, and they can “sell” improving women’s representation as a part of a package to enhance the party’s image among female voters. Thus, women’s parliamentary presence is framed as part of a larger, modern transformation to benefit the party at the ballot box.

Given the importance of women among the party leadership as a direct mechanism of change, and given the time series evidence in chapter 4 demonstrating that internal quotas lead to more women on the NEC, these internal quotas may be more effective in the chain of influences than previously thought. Plus, internal party quotas tend to be far less controversial than the highly visible candidate quotas. In short, the more contentious candidate quotas may be less imperative where there are internal quotas.

This process is most effective in a centralized party structure. Chapter 3 shows women climb the party ladder more easily in a centralized party. Chapter 4 shows quotas are more likely to be adopted in a centralized party. Finally, chapter 8 shows that women’s parliamentary presence is higher among centralized parties, all other things being equal. Linking these findings together suggests that parties that are centralized can effectively implement measures to
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ensure that women are nominated for office—when they are willing to do so. Yet chapter 4 also shows women within the party hierarchy make greater gains if the party organization is permeable to new interests, more “factionalized.” Factionalization and centralization seem to work at cross-purposes. It is important to note that although a permeable structure allows for more points of access for new contenders, a closed and centralized structure allows a party to act decisively in promoting women to parliament. So, a permeable (but not centralized) structure may allow women to make gains at the party’s grass roots, but it may not yield top-down campaigns to promote women candidates.

Furthermore, the final institutional opportunity structure factor is a party’s ideology. Parties with “New Left” value orientations are more likely to adopt quotas and prove to be more conducive to women’s promotion to the party national executive committee. Although chapter 8 shows that a leftist ideology is not directly related to women’s parliamentary presence, the mechanisms that lead to increases in women’s representation are more likely to be found in leftist parties. As such, a leftist orientation appears to be more fertile ground for women’s efforts to attain parliamentary office.

Social change forces appear to be a necessary, but not always sufficient, condition for party change. Pressures from voters and women’s organizations proved important. In the Finnish case, they proved sufficient. Thus, mass-level forces may suffice where the new contenders focus all of their energy and resources on partisan channels, and where the electoral rules provide just the right mix to facilitate women’s election. Yet in other cases, the demand for greater presence explains why parties moved to promote women, but not why they moved when they did. These pressures mounted, yet year after year party women realized few gains. Many of the early barriers to women’s advancement in party politics remained in place. Thus, the thrust of this book was to search for agents of change.

Where women didn’t make gains early on, electoral forces proved important so far as they motivated top-down efforts. Specifically, electoral instability and new party competition open up new opportunities for new contenders. Chapter 2 detailed some possible pressures generated by internal party dynamics. Party elites are concerned with the party’s electoral fortunes. A change in that membership, or reorganization of power, introduces new perceptions that responding to new issues will benefit the party. Specifically, more women among the party’s decision makers proved the vital ingredient in producing change. Women leaders can use their power to implement changes in a top-down process. In some cases, new policies such as quotas were adopted and implemented by mandating that the local party organizations follow the central party leadership’s lead.

The fact that having women in positions of power within the party is so integral to each step in the process of promoting women for office suggests
that women's gains are long-term. If policies designed to promote women candidates stemmed only from the party's desire to change its image among women voters, then efforts to increase women in parliament would appear to be short-term, symbolic strategies designed by party leaders to gain women's votes. Yet because these new party policies are directly related to increases in women who are firmly established in powerful positions within the party, the growth reflects a more fundamental shift in the party culture. As women have become more entrenched in higher positions, it has become more difficult to erase women's representation from the agenda.

Where women have focused their attention on parties, rather than on the outside movement, and where the party women's organizations have strategically framed the issue of women's political equality, women have made the greatest strides in achieving representation in parliament. This idea suggests a tradeoff long debated by social movements. As women work within the mainstream, male-dominated party institutions, they may conform to the existing standards of practice and make greater gains. In some cases where women have eschewed the mainstream party channels, their demands may remain more stringent, yet their party gains may be circumscribed.

Women have certainly made gains in parties and parliaments across Western Europe. The intent of this book has been to assess their gains in achieving presence and a voice in politics. The degree to which women have transformed party and national policy is left to future research. Yet one way in which women have changed party organization is by reconfiguring the institutions. As women challenged for equal voice in parliament, their demands were often heard, and where direct action was taken, the party recruitment policies were changed to mandate a certain proportion of women candidates. Not only does this type of policy change signal a commitment to women, but also to fair and equal representation of underrepresented groups in general.

In conclusion, movement groups can effectively take their demands to political parties. Women's successes demonstrate that parties are permeable structures, and not necessarily the stalwart, patriarchal bastion of entrenched interests as often characterized by the feminist movement and theories of institutionalization. Parties do respond, given the right conditions. The finding that women's efforts were matched by party responses speaks volumes for the health and vibrancy of our contemporary party organizations. Scholars of Western European parties note that parties appear to be losing the historical, encapsulated social cleavages upon which they traditionally relied for votes (Dalton et al., 1985; Crewe and Denver, 1985; Franklin et al., 1992). The erosion of groupings based upon class and religion that used to provide the stable partisan loyalties appear to be giving way to shifting coalitions of disparate interests. The “unanchoring” of women's votes without a clear gender realignment reflects this trend toward more ephemeral bases of electoral support that
parties face in a new era. Salient new issues such as women’s parliamentary presence can clearly be used by parties on an election-by-election basis, informed by public opinion polls and focus group research. In short, political parties need women. In turn, women need political parties if they are to change the face of parliaments. Rather than using citizen interest groups as an alternative to party politics, the findings of this book suggest that new contenders can take their demands to the parties, and that parties have the capability to respond—when they perceive the need to do so.

Theories that contend that parties are indeed thriving as their social bases shift often speak of party “adaptation.” However, the evidence from this case does not support the idea of an evolutionary adaptation. Instead, in most cases, real gains for women largely follow a “change from above” pattern, in which the party itself is a deliberate actor that shapes its own environment. In short, political parties in Western Europe will remain important actors in the democratic process, and new challengers demanding a political voice should design strategies to promote their interests within parties, bearing in mind that parties are complex sets of institutions, embedded within an ever-changing political context. In turn, with an increasingly shifting social base, the future electoral successes of established parties depend upon their ability and willingness to incorporate new issues and new groups.