

## **Gender quota in local politics: the Belgian case**

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**ABSTRACT** The Belgian electoral system is a proportional one, where semi-open party lists are used. Such a system is very suitable for the application of quota defining both a minimum/maximum share of fe/male candidates to electoral lists and a specific ranking of candidates of both sexes over the lists and it is not surprising that Belgium could be called a quota paradise. Quota have seen the light over the last three decades, both at party and at national level. All these quota concern legislative bodies. When it comes to the executive level, an upcoming federal act will impose at least one member of each sex to all executives. Although having been criticised for being all but progressive this act might make a difference in a large number of executives. The present contribution will focus on the use of gender quota at the local legislative and executive level and on their impact. This issue is of particular interest given the fact that local electoral matters have long been neglected in the study of gender and politics, while – at least in Belgium – this level is an important starting point for a political career.

### **1 Introduction**

Belgium consists of 589 municipalities, 308 of which are situated in the Flemish Region, 262 in the Walloon Region and 19 in the Brussels Capital Region. Local elections take place every six years. Since the 1993 state reform they are no longer linked to the elections for the federal chambers but take place simultaneously with the provincial elections (Marissal and Hansen 2001). As such this did not change anything of the local elections' status. The local level remains an important power basis for political parties and is the self-evident starting point for those who strive for a political career.

Municipal councillors are elected through a system of proportional representation. Candidates are elected on party lists being semi-closed since the system allows for multiple preferential voting. Seats are distributed to candidates in the order in which they appear on the list, adding to each candidate's preferential votes the amount of list votes needed to match the eligibility figure. Hence, it is not necessarily candidates with the highest number of preferential votes who get elected. The position on the list mainly influences whether a candidate gets a seat, because candidates situated at the top of the

list benefit of the devolution effect. The only two cases in which the ranking on the list has no impact is when a candidate's number of preferential votes attains the eligibility figure or when the list votes are already distributed while there are still seats to be allocated. Both situations are exceptional at the other levels but rather regular in the setting of local elections. This is due to the fact that a system of multiple preferential voting has a longer tradition and is better exploited at the local level than at the others. The percentage of candidates elected without respecting the list order attains figures of up to 50% (Ackaert 1994; Wauters 2000).<sup>1</sup> Finally, legislative changes in the period 2000-2002 were targeted at halving the impact of the list vote in order to – further – diminish the closeness of electoral lists.

The aldermen are elected amongst and by the local councillors<sup>2</sup> but the King appoints the mayor. In principle s/he is designated amongst the members of the local council but in exceptional cases the King can appoint a mayor external to the local council. Depending on the municipality's size of population the number of local council members varies between minimum 7 and maximum 55 members, including the aldermen and the mayor.

At the occasion of the last local elections held in October 2000, 13.077 local councillors were elected, who on their turn elected 2842 aldermen amongst themselves. Furthermore, 589 mayors were designated. On the whole, 57.825 citizens stood as candidates in the run-up to these elections. About 40% of these candidates (23.036), 27% of those elected (3.563)<sup>3</sup>, 20% of the aldermen and 8% of the mayors were women (Marissal and Hansen 2001). Hence, while we can see that there is not that much male overweight at the level of candidates, we can see that women become more rare the higher we climb the hierarchical ladder. This is especially the case for the level of the mayor, a powerful figure in Belgian local politics.

In this contribution we will not focus on the particular reasons why women get more rare at hierarchically speaking higher levels in local politics, but will focus on the measures taken to raise their share. One of the reasons for the cleavage between the number of women elected as local councillors and their share of mayors might reside in the fact that the federal legislator and several parties have applied quota defining a minimum share of female candidates to electoral lists and/or a specific ranking of candidates of both sexes over the lists over the last three decades. When it comes to the executive level, the current federal government wants to impose at least one member of each sex to all executives, but it is not yet sure to what extent this will concern the local level. Although they have repeatedly been criticised for not being progressive because the quota often imposes a mere minimum of women and not an equal share of both sexes and because it only applies to the level of candidates without guaranteeing an outcome in terms of the number of women elected, these quota might explain part of the cleavage between the number of women elected and the number of women designated at the local level.

In order to get a clear picture of the measures taken to balance the sex ratio in local politics we have to distinguish between legally imposed quota and those adopted by

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<sup>1</sup> By way of comparison: throughout the previous century less than 1% of the members of the Lower House and of the Upper House managed to get elected without occupying eligible positions (Craeghs and Dewachter 1998). On the use of preferential votes see: Smits and Thomas 1998; Smits and Wauters 2000.

<sup>2</sup> There are 8 exceptions where the bench of aldermen is directly elected by the voters, being Sint-Genesius-Rode, Linkebeek, Wezembeek-Oppem, Drogenbos, Kraainem and Wemmel (six communities in the periphery of Brussels), as well as Komen-Waasten and Voeren. This exception is part of a number of particular arrangements meant to mediate conflicts along the linguistic cleavage.

<sup>3</sup> On the whole 3.583 women took up a mandate as local councillor, which means slightly more women (.2%) accepted a mandate than had been elected.

parties (Dahlerup 1998). When it comes to quota parties have installed we can further distinguish between those established by the national party hierarchy and those that have been adopted by local party sections. Hence, we will distinguish between three levels of quota, legally imposed ones, those adopted by the national party hierarchy and those set by local party sections. All three levels can be distinguished both when it comes to quota applied to the legislative and quota targeting the composition of the executive. The legislative will be dealt with in section 3, the executive in section 4. Sections 5 and 6 try to answer the question to what extent gender quota do and can make a difference at the local political level and which conclusions can be drawn from these findings. But we will start by situating the sex ratios in local politics.

## **2 A comparative perspective on sex ratios in local Belgian politics**

In the introduction we saw that women make up 27% of the local councillors, 20% of the aldermen and 8% of the mayors. However, this actual picture should be compared with the percentage of women in local politics over time in order to see how many or few women participate in local politics since the last elections. From table 1 we can deduce that the number of female local councillors has been steadily growing from less than 10% to over 25% during the last quarter of a century. The share of female aldermen grew from slightly more than 6% to 20% whereas the share of female mayors rose from a mere 2% to 8%. From these findings we can draw two conclusions. First, the share of women has been steadily growing in all sections of local politics over the last quarter of a century. However, we can see that this process has accelerated. At the level of the women councillors and aldermen this has been the case during the three latest elections. When it comes to female mayors we find a more than linear growth for the last 2000 elections. Second, there have always been less female mayors than aldermen and less female aldermen than councillors. This can partly be explained by the fact that normally both the aldermen and the mayor are drawn from the pool of local councillors. Hence, if women are lesser in number among the councillors, then it is to be expected that they are even fewer in number among the aldermen or mayors. Especially since these functions, and mainly the position of the mayor is a politically interesting function. In summary, when compared over time, the overall percentage of women rose in all branches of local politics, but the relative position of women in the different branches of local politics does not differ much from earlier elections.

These are but averages and the situation in a concrete municipality can be very different. Four local councils had a higher number of women than of men elected and in 139 municipalities, about 24% of all communities, women made up at least one third of those elected. However, in the other 75% of all communities men made up more than two thirds of those elected. And in two local councils no women had been elected at all. On the whole, there is a correlation between a given municipality's district magnitude, it is the number of seats available, and the percentage of women elected. The higher the district magnitude, the more women get elected. Women also tend to increase their chances of getting elected in urban circumscriptions as opposed to rural ones, which can partly be explained by a higher district magnitude but also by a more progressive voting pattern. We can therefore say that the electoral system has some impact on the number of women elected, as well as the general socio-cultural setting (Marissal and Hansen 2001).

When it comes to the bench of aldermen, in 11 of them the number of female aldermen is higher than that of their male colleagues. In 138 communities, about 23% of all

municipalities, women made up at least one third of the aldermen, but in the other 77% men made up more than two thirds of the aldermen. And one third of the bench of aldermen is exclusively composed of men, which explains the on average lower share of female aldermen than female local councillors. Here again, we can see that exclusively male benches of aldermen can be found in areas with a lower than average population density and a more rural profile (Marissal and Hansen 2001).

**Table 1: % of fe/male local councillors, aldermen and mayors for the five last elections**

Election	Local councillors		Aldermen		Mayors	
	% women	% men	% women	% men	% women	% men
1976	9.2%	90.8%	6.4%	93.6%	2%	98%
1982	9.8%	90.2%	7.1%	92.9%	2.9%	97.1%
1988	13.8%	86.2%	10.4%	89.6%	3.9%	96.1%
1994	19.9%	80.1%	13%	87%	5%	95%
2000	27.0%	73.0%	20%	80%	8%	92%

Source: Ackaert 1995; Belgische coördinatie-comité ter voorbereiding van de wereldconferentie over vrouwen 1995; Marissal en Hansen 2001; Smet 1998

Given this overview of women in local politics, what does it mean compared to the percentages of fe/male politicians at the other levels of the Belgian political landscape? From table 2 we can deduce that female local councillors do rather well as compared to the higher political levels. Since the 1999 elections women make up 24.9% of the federal MPs, 20.9% in the councils of the regions and communities. And since the elections held in 2000 they make up 31% of the representatives in the provincial councils. With the exception of the provincial councils we find – on average – more women at the local level than at the level of the regions and communities or of the federal state. This is even more the case if we consider that provincial elections are generally conceived as second order elections, it is, that they are of lesser importance compared to elections at other political levels which take place simultaneously (Deschouwer and Meier 2002). Hence, the on average higher share of women at the provincial level should be put into perspective because of the lesser value that is generally awarded to these institutions, which accentuates the share of women representatives at the local level. A parallel conclusion can be drawn when it comes to the other political levels, since more weight is awarded to a political mandate in a council at the federal level or at that of the regions and communities than at the local one. However, notwithstanding the consensus on this point it should be underlined that the share of female representatives at the higher political levels is also influenced by district and party magnitude, and to a much larger extent than is generally admitted (Deschouwer and Meier 2002). While women make up 24.9% of the federal MPs, there are 23.3% of them in the Lower House and 28.2% in the Upper House, the last assembly having a much larger district magnitude. And similarly the share of female representatives drops in the various councils of the regions and communities in the order in which their district magnitude decreases: in the council of Brussels Capital Region there are 36% women, in that of the German-speaking minority 32%, in that of the Flemish Community 20.2% and in that of the Walloon region 10.7%. The council of the Francophone community is an exception because it is indirectly composed of members of the Francophone delegation in the council of Brussels Capital Region and of members of the Walloon council. Here we find 16% women. The provincial councils

are too many in number to name all of them here, but as with the local councils a correlation has been found between district magnitude and the number of women elected (Marissal and Hansen 2001).

**Table 2: % of wo/men in the legislative and executive at the various political levels since the last elections**

Political level	Legislative level		Executive level	
	% women	% men	% women	% men
Federal level <sup>1</sup>	24.9%	75.1%	20%	80%
Regional and Community level <sup>2</sup>	20.9%	79.1%	23.5%	76.5%
Provincial level <sup>3</sup>	31%	69%	Executive: 15% Governors: 10%	Executive: 85% Governors: 90%
Local level <sup>4</sup>	27%	73%	Aldermen: 20% Mayors: 8%	Aldermen: 80% Mayors: 92%

<sup>1</sup> At the federal level we find the Upper and the Lower House as well as the federal government.

<sup>2</sup> At the regional and community level we find the council and the executive of respectively the Brussels Capital Region, the Flemish Community, the Francophone Community, the German-speaking Community and the Walloon Region. It should also be mentioned that the Council of the Francophone Community is indirectly composed of members of the Francophone delegation in the council of Brussels Capital Region and of the Walloon council.

<sup>3</sup> At the provincial level we find the provincial council, executive and governor of respectively the provinces Antwerpen, Vlaams-Brabant, West-Vlaanderen, Oost-Vlaanderen, Limburg, Waals-Brabant, Henegouwen, Luik, Luxemburg and Namen.

<sup>4</sup> At the local level we find the municipal council, bench of aldermen and mayor of respectively all 589 municipalities

Sources: Peirens 1999; Van Molle and Gubin 1998; Verzele 2000

Still considering table 2 we can find a different picture when it comes to the executive. At the local level women are better represented in the executives than at the provincial levels, but they do not score better than at the other higher political levels. While women make up 20% of the aldermen and 8% of the mayors, there are only 15% women in the provincial executives and 10% female governors. But there are 20% women in the federal government and 23.5% women – on average – in the various executives of the regions and communities. Here the argument of the inverse relationship between the number of women and the value awarded to the institution makes no sense. The comparatively elevated number of women in the executives at the higher political levels can partly be explained by the fact that national party elites tend to be more progressive in terms of defending balanced sex ratios than local party sections (Lovenduski and Norris 1993). A number of national party elites, such as the Flemish ecologists consider an equal participation of both sexes to be important. For the rest feminist movements and women's policy machineries have sufficiently mobilised around these issues during the last two decades to convince most federal political circles that executives not containing a minimum number of women at these levels would be conceived as politically incorrect by part of the public opinion. This is due to the wide visibility of these institutions and their degree of power. Here we actually get an opposite connotation with power, in the sense that these institutions are considered to be too important not to have any women participating. At lower political levels the executives are less visible to the public opinion in terms of media coverage and the

pressure to balance them in terms of sexes is less high. However, the low number of women at the local executive level should also be put into perspective. First, as we saw about one third of the bench of aldermen is exclusively composed of men, which brings down the average percentage. Second, if we would consider the position of the prime minister (federal government) or of the minister-president (executives of the regions and communities) separately, the percentage of female mayors would be relatively 'high'. The reason for this is that there is no female prime minister or minister-president, and there has only been one female minister-president ever.<sup>4</sup>

### **3 Gender quota at the legislative local level**

At the legislative local level the Belgian political landscape offers a broad range of quota. Initially several parties initiated quota and generally did so for local elections first. But the number of women did on the whole not increase very quickly. This is one of the reasons why the federal government took the lead in these matters at the beginning of the 1990s and legally imposed a gender quorum to all electoral levels, including the local one. This legal initiative on its turn stimulated parties to take further initiatives in these matters. Recently the federal government adopted a new gender quota law strengthening the existing measures. Finally, several local party sections adopted their own quota.

#### **3.1 Legally imposed gender quota**

In an effort to meet the public claim for a balanced presence of wo/men in political decision-making the government took itself an initiative in these matters at the beginning of the 1990s. This led to the legal obligation to apply gender quota to electoral lists. The 1994 act meant 'to promote a balanced representation of men and women on electoral lists' stipulates that electoral lists may not comprise more than 2/3 of candidates of the same sex. Parties have to leave open the positions, which they would not manage to fill in with the required number of candidates of the under-represented sex. The act became effective in 1996 with the exception of the 1994 local and provincial elections. During those elections, as well as all other elections to be held between 1996 and the beginning of 1999, lists should comprise a maximum of 3/4 of candidates of the same sex. Only from 1999 onwards, electoral lists would have to respect a 2/3 quota. In practice the 1994 local and provincial elections were the only ones applying the temporary quota. Meanwhile the full version of the quota act has been applied to all electoral levels. In 1999 this was the case with the elections for the European Parliament, the federal Upper and Lower House, as well as with those for the councils of the various regions and communities; in 2000 it was the case with the local and provincial elections.

In 2002 a new gender quota act was voted because the previous one was constantly criticized for being both unfair and insufficient. It was considered to be unfair because it did not impose an equal share of fe/male candidates to electoral lists. And it was supposed to be insufficient because it did not impose a double quota. The new act imposes a strictly equal number of fe/male candidates to electoral lists. Furthermore, candidates of the same sex may not occupy the two first list positions. However, this

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<sup>4</sup> Laurette Onkelinx, a Francophone Socialist, has been Minister-President of the Francophone community for the period 1993-1999.

act, too, contains temporary measures. At the first elections after its putting into force the first three positions of electoral lists may not be occupied by candidates of the same sex. Hence, whereas the final quota will award women at least the second list position, the temporary one only guarantees them a third position.

### **3.2 Gender quota adopted by national party machineries**

Various parties applied quota or target figures<sup>5</sup> before the 1994 act was voted (for an overview see table 3). The first party to apply quota were the Flemish Greens. They introduced a 50% quorum from the moment the party was founded in 1985 and had it embedded in the party statutes. It was a double quorum because it prescribed an alteration of fe/male candidates over the whole list, the so-called zipper list, but especially over the two top positions. The quorum was targeted at the 1988 local elections. In 1991 it was extended to the federal level, in 1995 to the other intermediary levels. In 1995 the party also introduced a triple quorum. This implied that various lists being submitted in the same electoral district, for example in the case where elections are simultaneously held at various levels, may not all be led by a candidate of the same sex. The Flemish Social Democrats started with quota in 1992, indicating that women had to occupy 25% of the list positions. These quota concerned all levels and were added to the party statutes. They were considered to be the minimum, the aim being that members of the same sex should occupy no more than 2/3 of the positions. For the local and provincial elections of October 2000 the party top advised the zipper list. The Francophone Social Democrats only recently adopted first a target figure and then quota. In 1999 a target figure was set for the local and provincial elections of 2000 stipulating that at least one woman had to figure among the first three candidates. Electoral lists should further tend towards parity. At the end of 2000 the party adopted a statutory reform implying that electoral lists have to contain an equal number of fe/male candidates.

No other party imposed binding quota to electoral lists, but some stipulated target figures. The Flemish Christian Democrats were the first Belgian party ever to introduce such measures. From 1974 onwards at least one woman should occupy an eligible position. In 1975, in the wake of the International Women's Year, the party's target figure became 20% of women on local lists. In 1993 a rule was adopted to gradually raise the percentage of female candidates to 50%. The formula elaborated was  $x\% + (50\% - x\%)/2$ , whereby  $x$  is the percentage of candidates figuring on the lists at the previous elections (July 1997). This rule focused on the local and provincial elections of 1994. Since the 2000 local and provincial elections women should occupy at least four out of the lists' first ten positions. Furthermore all lists should respect the zipper principle. In 1982 the Flemish Liberals introduced a target figure for the local elections to be held that same year. Women should occupy 20% of the list positions. In 1985 this target figure was extended to the national level but subsequently dropped when the party changed name and statutes. Since the 2000 local and provincial elections a new target figure stipulates that at least one wo/man has to figure among the first three candidates whereas an equal number has to occupy the first ten positions. These target figures are not written in the party statutes and are only valid for the local and provincial

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<sup>5</sup> We distinguish between quota and target figures in the sense that the first are compulsory whereas the second are more of a goal striven for. As we will see below however, parties themselves do not always rigorously respect this distinction because they do not always respect the compulsory character of the quota they adopted themselves.

level. The Francophone Christian Democrats adopted a target figure in 1986, whereby a maximum of 2/3 of the candidates on electoral lists could be of the same sex. Furthermore, at least one of the first three candidates should be female. In 1991 these target figures were on a temporary basis added to the party statutes. The Francophone Greens were more hesitant on quota than their Flemish counterparts, having more confidence in a profound and lasting change of mentality than in measures making women catch up. Nevertheless, in 1993 a target figure stipulated that the first two list positions should go to candidates of a different sex. In 2000 a 50% target figure was adopted. The former Flemish Regionalists, finally, adopted a target figure in 2000 and imposed zipper lists to local and provincial elections.

**Table 3: Party measures meant to balance electoral lists in terms of fe/male candidates**

Party	Quota	Target figure
Flemish Greens (Agalev)	1985: 50% quota respecting zipper principle (at least for the 2 top positions) for 1988 local and provincial elections 1991: idem federal elections 1995: application of former quota to regional and community level; introduction triple quota	
Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V)		1974: min. 1 woman on eligible position 1975: min. 20% of women on local lists 1993: $x\% + (50\% - x\%)/2$ , x being the % of female candidates during the previous elections 1999: 4 out of 10 top positions on local and provincial lists should go to women; zipper lists for all elections
Flemish Social Democrats (SP-A)	1992: 3/4-1/4 quota	2000: zipper lists for local and provincial elections
Flemish Liberals (VLD)		1982: min. 20% of women on local and provincial lists 1985: extension target figure to federal lists 1993: cancellation target figures 2000: min. 1 candidate of each sex on 3 top positions and equal number of wo/men on first 10 positions of local and provincial lists
Flemish Regionalists (VU)		2000: zipper principle for local and provincial lists
Francophone Christian Democrats (CDH)		1986: max. 2/3 of candidates of same sex on list as such and 1 woman among first 3 candidates
Francophone Greens (Ecolo)		1993: zipper principle for first 2 list positions 2000: 50% target figure
Francophone Social Democrats (PS)	2000: 50% quota	

Source: Meier 2002

None of the other parties represented at the federal level (Flemish Right Extremists as well as Francophone Liberals and Regionalists) ever adopted similar measures, considering such techniques to be incompatible with their ideological or philosophical positions (Joly 1997; Van Molle and Gubin 1998). Smaller parties also argued that their pool of potential candidates is too small to allow for other selection criteria than those imposed by law.

We can see that actually most parties took measures meant to promote a sex balance in the electoral process. In total eight out of the eleven major parties dispose of their own gender quota or target figures. And most of them did strengthen their measures over time. Only one party abolished such measures, the Flemish Liberal one. It did so at the beginning of the 1990s in the wake of a general metamorphosis. Furthermore, many parties adopted their own party measures once the first gender quota act had been adopted in 1994. However, they did not so much do so in terms of form but in terms of content, adopting target figures striving for more sex-balanced electoral lists than what the federal government imposes. This implies that the federal 1994 gender quota act had a stimulating effect. It is not only that once a given party starts to employ such measures others tend to follow. The point is that once the law establishes a minimum standard, parties tend to outbid this standard. The Belgian evolution of national and party measures indicates that the issue of a sex-balanced participation in political decision-making is a societal and political struggle whereby legal measures serve as a benchmark. The law raises the minimum standard from no measures paying attention to sex balance electoral lists to a minimum standard. Parties wanting to outbid each other in terms of a gender aware profile have no alternative than to outbid the law. We saw that the 1994 gender quota act made parties turn to higher stakes (and we can assume that this dynamic will also take place in the wake of the 2002 gender quota act). However, what is mainly interesting from the local perspective is the fact that most parties in a first instance focus at the local electoral level before extending their measures to the others, if they do so at all. It is apparently easier to impose measures to a lower political level far away from the national party machinery, than to impose similar measures to electoral lists composed by the national party leaders.

### **3.3 Gender quota adopted by local party sections**

In Belgium the smallest party level is the local section. Next to the national party machinery several local sections have themselves adopted gender quota or target figures, which is as such not surprising if we consider that the local section is autonomous in composing electoral lists for local elections.

From table 4 we can deduce that on average 16.2% of the local party sections adopted their own gender quota and a further 9.2% did so with target figures. This does not necessarily imply that these measures do require more than what has been legally imposed or adopted by the national party machinery.<sup>6</sup> In a number of cases the local party measures do correspond with those taken at a hierarchically higher level. The reason for this is that local sections took such measures before they have been adopted at a hierarchically higher level or that they were introduced simultaneously. In the last case these measures have to be considered as a local support of the decision taken by the national party machinery or by the legislator. In a number of cases the local measures

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<sup>6</sup> The data on local party sections' gender quota and target figures have been collected prior to the last 2000 local elections. They can therefore only be more far-reaching than the 1994 gender quota act since the latest gender quota act has been voted in 2002.

are however more far-reaching and impose parity or a double quorum, it is a specific ranking of fe/male candidates over (part of) the electoral lists.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, whenever a local party section did adopt both gender quota and target figures the last are more far-reaching than what has been imposed by law or by the national party machinery.

**Table 4: % of local party sections with separate gender quota or target figures**

Party	Quota	Target figures	Quota & target figures <sup>1</sup>
Flemish Greens (Agalev)	22.4%	12.6%	0%
Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V)	4.5%	11.6%	0%
Flemish Social Democrats (SP-A)	16.0%	16.0%	0%
Flemish Right Extremists (VB)	3.3%	3.3%	0%
Flemish Liberals (VLD)	11.4%	7.8%	0%
Flemish Regionalists (VU)	10.7%	18.7%	1.3%
Other Flemish parties	13.6%	18.2%	0%
Francophone Christian Democrats (CDH)	8.0%	1.8%	0.9%
Francophone Greens (Ecolo)	32.4%	19.1%	1.5%
Francophone Regionalists (FDF)	20.0%	0%	0%
Francophone Right Extremists (FN)	0%	0%	0%
Francophone Liberals (PRL)	17.6%	0%	0.8%
Francophone Social Democrats (PS)	32.7%	0%	0%
Other Francophone parties	10.0%	0%	0%
Total	16.2%	9.2%	0.4%

<sup>1</sup> This column concerns the percentage of local sections applying gender quota and target figures simultaneously, not the total percentage of local sections using either gender quota or target figures

Source: Meier 2001a

From table 4 we can further deduce that in some parties the local sections tend to use gender quota or target figures rather than both. Within the ranks of the Flemish Social Democrats, Regionalists and Christian Democrats mainly target figures are applied whereas local sections of the Francophone Regionalists, Social Democrats and Liberals seem to prefer quota. Only the local sections of the two ecological parties tend to work with both gender quota and target figures. But this does not mean that one section does use both gender quota and target figures, because the share of local sections using both types of measures simultaneously is negligibly small. However, if we add per party the percentages of local sections using gender quota or target figures, the ecological parties are the leaders in terms of local sections adopting structural measures meant to balance gender relations in local elections. This is not strange if we consider that at the national level the ecological parties, especially the Flemish one, has taken the most far reaching measures in order to promote a gender balance in electoral matters. The findings at the local level confirm the fact that the Greens are among those parties where the leadership is – apparently at all levels – convinced of the importance to translate principles of gender equality into practice.

Even though but 16.2% of the local party sections adopted their own gender quota and 9.2% target figures, on the whole about one fourth of the local party sections disposes of separate measures meant to balance gender relations in local elected politics. As we said before, whenever both the national party machinery and a given local section have adopted such measures, the local initiative is very often inspired by the national one. It

<sup>7</sup> See comment previous footnote.

is for instance interesting to note that in most cases where the percentage of local sections with own gender quota or target figures is higher than the national average the national party machinery had launched similar suggestions prior to the 2000 local elections, thus the moment the local party sections had been interviewed. The only exceptions to this are the local sections of the Flemish Liberals where the percentage of local gender quota and target figures is lower than the national average. But the relatively high share of Flemish Social Democrats' and Regionalists' local sections adopting target figures or of Francophone Social Democrats' local sections adopting quota can be explained this way. In these cases the measures adopted by the national party machinery have a stimulating effect on local sections as did the 1994 gender quota act on parties as such. But the data also show that the local sections of some parties are more sensitive to the issue of actively promoting gender equality in electoral matters than is their national party machinery, because in some cases local sections dispose of gender quota or target figures whereas the party as such does not impose similar measures. This goes for instance for local sections of the Francophone Liberals and Regionalists.

#### **4 Gender quota at the executive local level**

When it comes to the executive local level the situation is very different from the broad range of quota available at the legislative level. Although it would theoretically be possible, no party as such or a local party section has taken measures to balance the number of men and women among the aldermen or mayors. As mentioned before the aldermen are elected by and among the local councillors, more precisely among the local councillors who have been presented as candidates through an official declaration prior to this election. It is imaginable that a given party (section) decides to present minimum or maximum shares of candidates of each sex. The only prerequisite in this case is that it disposes of local councillors of both sexes, an electoral outcome which can be stimulated through a presentation of gender-balanced electoral lists. Only where district magnitude and/or party magnitude are very low there might be the risk that notwithstanding the presentation of a gender-balanced electoral list only candidates of one sex get elected. But, as mentioned, no party (section) has so far taken firm measures meant to balance their presentation of fe/male candidates for the bench of aldermen.

However, the federal legislator has recently started playing with a similar idea. Since the 1970s the feminist movement claimed female ministers, or more broadly women in the executives, and there have been attempts to ensure a presence of members of both sexes (Meier 2001b). While they focused on the federal government during the previous legislatures, they nowadays focus at all executive levels. The broadening of the focus is mainly due to the fact that still half of the executives at the level of the regions and communities are entirely composed of men, but as we see the same goes for a considerable number of benches of aldermen.

The present federal Minister of Equal Opportunities has launched the idea to legally impose that all executives be composed of members of both sexes. Both the Lower and Upper House voted a revision of the constitution in order to insert the stipulation that all executives should contain members of both sexes.<sup>8</sup> However, next to a revision of the

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<sup>8</sup> Gedr. Stuk. Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers 50-1141/6 'Herziening van titel II van de Grondwet, met de bedoeling er een bepaling in te voegen betreffende het recht van de vrouwen en de mannen op gelijkheid en de bevordering van de gelijke toegang tot door verkiezing verkregen en openbare mandaten, 24/01/2002 (www.senate.be).

constitution supplementary legislation has to be elaborated in order to put this future constitutional principle into practice. Furthermore, the present formulation does not contain a specification of the minimum or maximum share of fe/male members, which implies that the executives will not necessarily contain more than one women. In that case we could not speak of a balanced presence of both sexes in political decision-making but rather of a symbolic female presence. But as we will see in the next section, such a measure would still make a difference in one third of the benches of aldermen, which do not yet contain a single woman. Finally, the present federal government decided to transfer local electoral matters to the level of the regions and communities. Hence, nothing hinders the various political actors who will in the future be dealing with these matters to impose a gender balance to benches of aldermen.

## **5 The respect and impact of quota at the local political level**

The fact that the Belgian local political landscape, at least the legislative level, contains a large number of gender quota or target figures does not necessarily imply that these measures make sense. With the issue of sense we do not so much refer to the normative question of whether gender quota are a legitimate measure, a debate, though very interesting, which we are not dealing with in the present contribution. We rather focus on a more technical aspect of the gender quota debate, namely to know to what extent such measures are respected and do have an impact in terms of the number of women present in local political decision-making.

### **5.1 The respect of quota at the local political level**

Proclaiming measures is one thing, respecting them is another one, even if these measures are binding. Hence we analyse to what extent gender quota and target figures have been respected during the last elections. On the observation of the national quota legislation we can be very brief. During the 2000 local elections all submitted electoral lists respected the imposed quota of at least 1/3 of candidates of each sex (Marissal and Hansen 2001; Deschouwer and Meier 2002).

The picture is a bit more complex when it comes to the extent to which local party sections respect the measures taken by the national party machinery. The Flemish Greens imposed a 50-50 sex ratio and the occupation of the two top positions of candidates of a different sex upon their local sections. Both rules were relatively well observed. 48% of the candidates were women<sup>9</sup> and 84% of the (189) local lists applied a zipper principle to the two first positions (Marissal and Hansen 2001)<sup>10</sup>. However, few lists applied the zipper principle over the entire list, namely 14%. The Flemish Social Democrats also stipulated a zipper principle and especially an alternation of fe/male candidates for the two top positions. While 55% of the (213) lists observed the last target figure only 4% did so for the first one. The Flemish Christian Democrats also strove for the zipper principle but merely 2% of the (259) lists observed it. The party

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<sup>9</sup> 48% of female candidates does not imply that each list contains an equal number of fe/male candidates, but more detailed data are not available. A similar remark goes for the Francophone Greens and Social Democrats dealt with below.

<sup>10</sup> The data on the list composition figuring in this and the next paragraph were gathered and published by Marissal and Hansen 2001; relating them to the observation of party gender target figures and quota is our own responsibility.

also suggested that women occupy at least four out of the ten first positions. No data are available on this but about half of the lists (56%) had candidates of a different sex occupy the two top positions. While this does not say anything about the distribution of the other eight first positions between fe/male candidates it might be a rough indicator for the fact that more lists observed the target figure of four women amongst the first ten candidates than the zipper principle. The Flemish Regionalists are the last party suggesting a zipper principle, which was observed in 9% of the (89) lists.

The Francophone Social Democrats aimed at fe/male balanced lists and 42% of the candidates were indeed women. Women should also occupy at least one of the first three list positions. Here again precise data are missing but 44% of the (159) lists applied a zipper principle to the two first positions. Hence at least 44% of the lists observed the set target figure. An analogous argument can be handled in the case of the Flemish Liberals who had also set the target figure of reserving one of the first three list positions for women. Given the fact that 43% of the (211) lists observed a zipper principle when it comes to the first two list positions at least 43% of the lists respected the target figure set. The Francophone Greens, finally, aimed at fe/male balanced lists and 46% of the candidates were women.

Unfortunately, no data are available on the extent to which local party sections respect their own gender quota and target figures. But former research has shown that parties where an elevated number of local sections dispose of their own rules, on the whole presented more gender-balanced lists for the 2000 local elections than did the other parties (Marissal and Hansen 2001; Deschouwer and Meier 2002). We can therefore assume that locally initiated gender quota and target figures do have more than a symbolic character.

Considering the extent to which parties or party sections observe gender quota and target figures, we can conclude that although all of them respect legally imposed measures, they do not in a uniform way observe theirs. While local sections seem to be less reluctant to place an equal number of fe/male candidates on electoral lists and to have candidates of a different sex occupy the two top positions, they have more problems respecting the application of a zipper principle to the entire list. However, this does not only go for the 2000 local elections but equally for those held in 1999 and before (Carton 2001; Mateo Diaz 2002; Peirens 1999; Verzele and Joly 1999; Verzele 2000). Nonetheless, while there has been an evolution over the last decade to not merely award positions but eligible positions to women, (local) party gate keepers still refuse to equally distribute all eligible seats between wo/men. In that respect the most far-reaching party measures are a public relations operation rather than the proof of the will to promote an equal participation of both sexes in decision-making.

## **5.2 The impact of quota at the local political level**

It is nearly impossible to measure the exact impact of the use of gender quota or target figures. The fact that the share of female local politicians has been rising is no proof for the fact that gender quota or target figures would have an impact. First of all, this increase of the number of women started before gender quota and target figures were introduced. But even if the increase of the number of female local politicians would have taken place subsequently to the introduction of gender quota or target figures, we could not deduce that such measures had an impact, because of the large number of factors influencing the electoral outcome that cannot all be controlled for (Deschouwer and Meier 2002).

The only situation where such an impact could be measured with certainty is when gender quota guarantee an outcome. This would be the case if the idea to impose a rule that executives may not contain but members of one sex will be enshrined in the legislation. Imagine such a rule would be applied to the next local elections to be held in 2006. Even if all benches of aldermen would then contain but one female member, there would still be 1% more female aldermen than there has been since the 2000 elections. It is very unlikely that benches of aldermen containing a high number of women will all of a sudden contain but one women, but the 2000 elections have shown that a minimum number of female aldermen is no guarantee that the bench of aldermen will always have women among its members. In 28 municipalities containing at least one woman after the 1994 elections the bench of aldermen constituted after the 2000 elections was again composed of only men (Marissal and Hansen 2001). And it would be even more unlikely that all of the 194 benches of aldermen not yet having a female alderman would all suddenly see female members join the ranks after the next election. In this respect we could say that a gender quota applied to the composition of the executive – and not merely to the list of candidates presented for the executive – would make a difference. This impact would not be that visible in the share of female aldermen. As we saw such a gender quota would only guarantee 1% more female aldermen than there are right now. But the impact would be visible for all those 194 benches of aldermen, which are still solely composed of male members. It goes without saying that a gender quota imposing a more balanced share of fe/male members would have more impact.

If the gender quota for the executive will come through, there will be a big difference with quota and target figures applied to the legislative, because the last ones are only applied to the input side of the electoral process, namely the composition of electoral lists, and not to the output side, it is the number of fe/male candidates elected. In this regard measures applied to the legislative side of local politics will never guarantee a fixed outcome of the elections in terms of fe/male ratios. However, two points can still be raised when it comes to the impact of gender quota and target figures on the gender-balance in the local legislatives. First, the various measures have perhaps not had an impact in terms of guaranteeing a certain share of female local councillors to get elected. But as we said before, measures imposed from above set the standard of what were to be considered politically correct electoral lists in terms of fe/male balance and made parties and party sections outbid this standard in order to profile themselves along these lines. Second, even though the list order is of a lesser importance at the local electoral level than at the others, the top positions are still interesting positions. Even though up to half of the local candidates get elected without respecting the list order, those situated at the top position get per definition elected. Since women made up but 18% of the candidates occupying the first place on the list in 2000 and only 54% of the lists contained candidates of a different sex for the first two positions, the 2002 gender quota law imposing such an alternation will make a difference. This will not be the case in party sections were similar measures had already be adopted. As we saw, parties might not be eager to apply a zipper principle over the entire lists, but they fairly well respected an alternation of fe/male candidates at the top positions whenever they imposed it to themselves. However, the 2002 gender quota law will make a difference for all those parties or party sections not disposing of such measures because of its compulsory character.

## 6 Conclusion

In this contribution we took a closer look at the measures meant to improve the gender balance in Belgian local politics, describing the range of measures available, analysing to what extent they are respected and do have an impact. We saw that most parties did impose a form of gender quota or target figure to electoral lists, and that these measures were generally first introduced at the local level. Next to this we also saw that a number of local party sections adopted their own measures. They did so in order to support or complete the measures taken by the legislator or by the national party machinery or to fill in the gap whenever such measures did not – yet – exist at a hierarchically higher level. Finally, we saw that the federal legislator adopted two gender quota act, a first in 1994 and a second in 2002, often lagging behind the measures of progressive parties but stimulating others to adopt similar measures or upgrade the existing ones. On the whole we can say that there is a broad range of gender quota and target figures, which over time evolved from imposing a minimum of women to imposing more gender-balanced sex ratios in local elected politics. We can also conclude that most of these measures are fairly well respected, with the exception of the application of the zipper principle over the whole length of electoral lists. However, all measures applied to the legislative side of local politics do but concern the input side of the electoral process and not the output side, it is the number of women elected. Nonetheless, the more quota and target figures focus on eligible seats the more their impact is visible, even though the notion of an eligible seat is not as strong in local Belgian politics as at the other levels. At the executive side of local politics the first firm measures meant to promote a gender balance still have to be adopted, but even if they will but enshrine a minimalist presence of women, they will make a difference. This is due to the fact that up until now still one third of the benches of aldermen are solely composed of male members.

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