Contagion theory revisited:
When do political parties compete on women's representation?

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ABSTRACT. 'Contagion theory' suggests that the dynamics of diffusion and competition influence a party's propensity to put forward more women candidates –or to adopt candidate gender quotas, in its more recent applications. Specifically, the equality strategies on women's representation adopted by small (generally leftist) parties on the political periphery will incentivize other rival parties to follow suit, especially in countries with PR electoral systems. Yet while the concept of 'contagion' is widely used, its frequent descriptive and uncritical application to single-case studies has obscured the fact that the original conditions of the theory are often not met. We seek to re-evaluate the central propositions of contagion theory, drawing on a comparative study of West European countries. Our findings challenge and/or qualify its key tenets as currently conceptualized and highlight the need to consider both external and intra-party factors.

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Introduction

Political parties have increasingly taken measures to increase women's representation through the use of strong equality guarantees like gender quotas or other 'softer' measures (such as targets, recommendations or goals) to select and elect more female candidates (Krook 2009). In seeking to explain these trends, research on women and politics suggests that dynamics of party competition influence a party's propensity to promote women candidates (Matland and Studlar 1996). Specifically, measures to promote women's representation introduced by small (generally leftist) parties will set in motion a process of 'contagion', whereby rival parties will follow suit in order to compete, thus having a wider impact on the party system.

However, this conceptualization of contagion theory has faced increasing criticism for the descriptive and uncritical way in which it has been applied empirically (Cowell-Myers 2011; Kenny and Mackay 2013). While the concept of 'contagion' is widely used in the field of women and politics, there is little systematic evidence as to the conditions under which quota contagion occurs. Furthermore, the predominant focus in the literature on single-case studies of quota contagion has limited the broader applicability of existing findings (see, among others, Kolinsky 1991; Baldez 2004; Meier 2004; Davidson-Schmich 2010; Verge 2012).

This paper seeks to re-evaluate the central propositions of contagion theory and surveys under what conditions parties compete on women's representation. Building on recent work in the field, we advocate a more dynamic model of the contagion effect that considers how both exogenous and endogenous opportunity structures impact on party decisions to promote women's representation. In doing so, we adopt a historical approach, seeking to assess not only the 'reach' of quota contagion (the extent to which quotas have 'caught on' across the party system), but also changes in configurations of conditions over time, and their resulting impact on representative outcomes (see Krook 2009). By drawing on a sample of West European countries with PR systems spanning four decades, we are able to track changes over a longer period and to test hypotheses related to the main internal and external factors that have facilitated or inhibited party competition over women's representation over time. We focus on PR systems as they are considered to be theoretically advantageous for contagion, but also present the largest variance in terms of women's numerical representation, thus necessitating a closer examination.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The first section surveys trends in women's representation in the last three decades in West European countries and reviews the basic tenets of contagion theory. The second section presents the data and methods used to test our hypotheses. The third section explores patterns of quota contagion in Western Europe via three sets of pair comparisons. The last section discusses our findings and evaluates their implications for contagion theory.

Revisiting contagion theory

Women's representation in Western Europe has significantly increased over the last three decades from average levels below 10 per cent in national parliaments around 1980 to slightly above 30 per cent in the 2010s. However, regional averages tend to mask significant cross-country differences that cannot be solely explained by socioeconomic or cultural variables. For example, world league rankings show that women's representation is often much higher among some of the world's poorer societies than in some of the most affluent (IPU 2013). Alternative explanations have focused on the barriers women face at the systemic and the party level, including recruitment practices (Norris and Lovenduski 1995). Electoral systems and the corresponding type of party competition they produce emerge as crucial variables, with studies generally confirming higher levels of women's representation under PR systems (Norris 1985; Paxton 1997; McAllister and Studlar 2002).

In their seminal article, Matland and Studlar (1996) seek to explain why PR systems are more open to demands for women's representation than majority/plurality systems. Drawing on the literature on party change, these authors argue that processes of 'contagion' with regards to women's representation should be more effective under PR systems, since elections are more competitive and the 'costs' of promoting women's representation are lower. For one thing, it is substantially easier to present balanced tickets in PR systems, as higher district magnitude allows parties to nominate women without having to depose male candidates. Additionally, the greater number of parties increases the probability that one of them will start actively promoting women candidates[1] (Matland and Studlar 1996: 714). Matland and Studlar contend that the process of 'contagion' is usually set in motion by small leftist parties, which act as

[1] Others argue that PR systems have a better fit with quotas as they are inspired by norms of group representation, whereas majoritarian systems prioritize individuals (Krook, Lovenduski and Squires 2009: 790).

catalysts, showing that there is no electoral penalty to promoting women candidates. This pressures larger parties to take direct action themselves –especially those ideologically close to the innovator– since losing votes to even minor parties might entail fewer seats in parliament. Over time, as each party responds to their competitors' actions, the 'perceived need to nominate women' will diffuse across the party system as part of a process of 'macrocontagion' (Matland and Studlar 1996: 712). Simultaneously, 'microcontagion' takes place when a party reacts to the promotion of women by other parties in prominent positions at the district level by also nominating more women in that district.

While both processes are complementary, Matland and Studlar highlight that they are also independent; therefore, in this paper we exclusively focus on macrocontagion in order to better establish the mechanisms behind different patterns of diffusion within PR systems. As previously highlighted, while the concept of 'contagion' is widely used in the women and politics literature, recent studies have pointed to the need to re-evaluate the conditions under which quota contagion occurs. Changes in the external and internal opportunity structures of parties and the party system can facilitate or constrain party change, including changes in party rules such as gender quotas or other softer equality measures. Thus, while we consider how the broader features of the political system and institutional environment shape the contagion process, we focus also on internal party dynamics (cf. Kittilson 2006; Kenny and Mackay 2013; Kenny and Verge 2013). Through this integrated approach to party change, we re-evaluate the central tenets of contagion theory and seek to identify and elaborate the institutional and temporal conditions under which contagion occurs.

One of the core assumptions of Matland and Studlar's (1996) formulation of contagion theory is that contagion is more likely to be set in motion by a left-wing party which is small but competitive. Yet while left-wing and/or new parties are considered to be more sensitive to demands for women's presence (Caul 1999; 2001), there is no such general pattern in the literature as to the role of small catalyst parties. Although some studies point to their importance in initiating processes of quota contagion (Kolinsky 1991; Davidson-Schmich 2010), other studies instead highlight the crucial innovating role of centrist (Cowell-Myers 2011) or larger leftist (Verge 2012; Kenny and Mackay 2013) parties. Furthermore, in many cases, small parties may not be electorally competitive –in that they either have not won any seats in national elections or their seat share is too low to have an impact on the wider party system. While PR systems favor

multi-party competition, ultimately the combination of district magnitude and the electoral threshold in place determines the degree of proportionality of the system. Larger parties, in contrast, may have more pronounced external incentives to take the lead on women's representation. As vote and office-seeking parties, large parties will be more open to innovations in order to compete more successfully, particularly in periods of electoral uncertainty or when suffering electoral losses (Harmel and Janda 1994: 265, Harmel *et al.* 1995; Katz and Mair 1992: 9). Thus, we posit that, *a party is more likely to take the lead in promoting women's representation if it is facing external political pressures, for example, a poor (or decreasing) electoral performance or a gender gap in voting (H1)*. Yet, we acknowledge that external stimulus may be a necessary but insufficient condition for party change as the party leadership interprets environmental changes and decides the action to take (Scarrow 1996). Simultaneously, internal factors can explain change *per se* (Aldrich 1995). Organizational dynamics entrenched in each party can be 'immediate' sources of change (Müller 1997: 294). As the women and politics literature has suggested, the mobilization of women within parties is a key factor in pushing for the adoption of quotas and other affirmative action measures (Lovenduski and Norris 1993; Krook 2009; Kittilson 2006). So, *the contagion process is more likely to be led by parties with strong women's sections (H2)*.

A second assumption of contagion theory is that once (some) parties start to promote women actively, the contagion process will spread across the political system. After quotas or other affirmative action measures are adopted, the electoral costs of not adhering to quota measures are likely to increase (Davidson-Schmich 2010). This will be especially true in the case of large left-wing parties, who ideologically support equality of results and who might feel threatened electorally from their left flank. While centre and right-wing parties may be initially more likely to resist positive action, often on the grounds of the merit principle (Kittilson 2006; Dahlerup 2007), Matland and Studlar argue that the perceived need to nominate women will eventually 'flow across the political system to virtually all parties' (1996: 712). Yet, there is mixed evidence for the contagion-from-the-left assumption in subsequent studies. In some countries, larger left-wing parties have (at least initially) resisted reaction to the actions of electoral competitors on their left flank, often for quite a long period (Verge 2013). Similarly, centrist and right-wing parties have often proven 'immune' to the contagion effect (Kenny and Mackay 2013). We argue that the original sequence is not inevitable and posit instead that *contagion is more likely to reach more parties if the catalyst or early*

adapter party is located in a central position of the party system since then contagion will irradiate to both left and right political rivals with whom it competes for votes (H3).

The third core assumption of contagion theory is that these processes will follow a relatively straightforward trajectory of forward momentum. Once quotas and other affirmative action measures are institutionalized, gender equality should theoretically become part of the wider norms of candidate recruitment, resulting in a rise in the numbers of women selected and elected (see Bhavnani 2009). Yet, empirical applications of contagion theory point to the need to explore developments over a longer period, highlighting the potential for setbacks or reversals in women's representation and the use of quota measures over time (Kenny and Mackay 2013; see also Davidson-Schmich 2010; Kenny and Verge 2013).

Measures that are not effectively implemented are empty gestures and will put no pressure on other competitors to follow suit, so analyses of contagion need to take into account not only the levels of selected but also of elected women by the innovator party. *Contagion is expected to spread more if catalyst parties/early adapters effectively implement quota and other affirmative action provisions (H4).* This, in turn, is mediated by party organization, as centralized parties are likely to be more vulnerable to pressures for contagion (Cowell-Myers 2011: 426). While a decentralized party structure may lead to gains for women at the grassroots level, a centralized structure gives party leaders more power to implement and enforce gender equality reforms –when they are willing to do so (Lovenduski and Norris 1993; Murray 2010; Kenny and Verge 2013). Furthermore, the inclusion of placement mandates in party quotas allows parties to overcome the constraining effects of electoral system features (Meier 2004).

Data and methods

While the logic of contagion and diffusion has been applied to the study of legislative gender quotas, in Western Europe, voluntary party quotas are much more common. Yet, while a significant number of parties have adopted quotas, there is still significant variation across parties, with some adopting quotas or other affirmative action measures as early as the 1970s, while others have still failed to do so. Typically, these reforms require multiple attempts to be adopted and effectively implemented over time, and play out in different ways across countries and parties, with diverse effects on levels of women's representation (Krook 2009). Yet, while research in this area points to the

significance of party competition and party behavior in increasing levels of women's representation, the question of 'how or why the introduction of quotas *anywhere* in a multiparty system would increase women's representation *across* the system' (Cowell-Meyers 2011: 411) has not been fully answered.

In order to provide a more detailed analysis of this process of macro-contagion, we have selected a sample of West European countries with strong party organizations so that we can measure parties' external and internal responses to demands for women's representation. Our main dependent variable is the policy innovation adopted to promote women's representation (in the form gender quotas or other affirmative action measures, such as targets or recommendations), adopted from the 1980s until the most recent elections. In order to assess the effective implementation of quotas we also look at the percentage of women in the parliamentary delegations of parties as well as the average of the lower house. The main internal independent variables are party ideology, strength of women's sections, and the degree of centralization of candidate selection processes. As to salient external features we look at the system of party competition, including the identification of catalyst parties as well as the strength of leftist parties in parliament; degree of proportionality of the system[2], using as a proxy the effective number of parliamentary parties; and control for the existence of legislative quotas[3] and type of electoral lists in use[4].

Processes of macrocontagion will be examined in a sample of West European countries with PR electoral systems. As said, PR systems present the largest variance in terms of women's representation. Taking into account the percentage of women deputies in national parliaments in the most recent elections (IPU, 2013), the standard deviation in majority systems is 3.11 while in PR systems it is 9.35. Six cases have been paired according to welfare and gender regimes (two Nordic cases, two Central

[2] As already highlighted, the combination of district magnitude and the electoral threshold in place determines the degree of proportionality of the system. The comparative literature suggests that within PR systems, levels of women elected tend to be higher in large multi-member districts (Rule 1987; Norris 2006). As our study focuses on macro processes of contagion we do not look at district-level data and therefore cannot properly test the impact of the environmental constrains entrenched in electoral features.

[3] In Western Europe, legislative quotas have been passed in Belgium, France, Portugal, Spain, Greece and Ireland.

[4] Closed party lists are considered to facilitate women's representation. Since voters merely ratify party selectors' candidate choices, their positive impact depends on women being placed in winnable positions. Comparative studies of preferential voting systems, in contrast, point to significant variations in the effects of voter choice on women's representation (see Matland 2005). Some scholars argue that preferential voting potentially advantages women, because the electorate can mobilize to support women candidates (Rule and Shugart 1995). However, voter choice might also limit the effectiveness of party or legislative gender quotas (Curtin 2006).

European cases and two South European cases) since these variables might shape cultural biases against female politicians (including expectations of women's electability by voters and party selectors). Following Matland and Studlar's (1996) case selection criteria, within pairs, we have picked the best performer country in terms of women's representation and paired it to the worst performer, or to a country which performs significantly worse and can be compared. Comparability is shaped by electoral system features. With these factors in mind we have paired (i) Sweden and Iceland, two Scandinavian countries with social democratic welfare states and PR preferential voting; (ii) Belgium and Austria, two Central European countries with conservative welfare states and PR preferential voting; and, (iii) Spain and Portugal, two South European countries with familialistic welfare states and PR closed lists[5]. Table 1 outlines our main theoretical expectations for each of the countries under examination and Table 2 identifies the ideological position of each of the parties to be surveyed.

[TABLE 1 AND TABLE 2ABOUT HERE]

Women's representation in Western Europe

Sweden and Iceland

The Nordic countries have an international reputation for high levels of women's representation and extended welfare states (Freidenvall, Dahlerup and Skjeie 2006). The unique political culture of the region has long been regarded as conducive to women's representation, and the emphasis on social and economic equality has frequently been offered as an explanation for the relatively high proportion of women parliamentarians (Skard and Haavio-Mannila, 1984). Yet, this does not account for changes in levels of women's representation over time, starting in the 1970s. For example, whereas Sweden and Norway had already reached the 30 per cent threshold for women parliamentarians in the 1980s, Denmark and Iceland needed an extra decade to attain similar levels.

[5] Sweden is the best performer in the Nordic region. Finland has a pure open-list system and Denmark a mixed preferential system. Within the Central European region we excluded non comparable electoral systems (Germany – mixed system; Netherlands – single district). In Southern Europe, Spain is the best performer. The worst performers are Italy and Greece. Italy has a mixed system and the continuous merging and splits of parties makes it difficult to track the 'owners' of the party quotas. Greece has an open-list system, the party winning the election obtains a 50-seat bonus, and contagion has not been observed.

The Swedish and Icelandic electoral systems have remained relatively constant over time. There is, however, some variance between the two countries. In 1998 Sweden shifted from closed list PR to open list PR with voluntary preferential voting, the same system used in Iceland. In both countries, however, the scope for preferential voting has been limited and there is little evidence that voter preferences have significantly affected which candidates have been elected to parliament (see Karvonen 2004; Indriðason and Kristinsson 2013). Both countries use relatively large constituencies (with an average district magnitude of 10.5) which produce high party magnitudes. Still, the same facilitating conditions have produced significant differences in each country's trajectory on women's representation (see Tables 3 and 4).

(INSERT TABLES 3 AND 4 ABOUT HERE)

In Sweden, the Liberal Party introduced a 40 per cent internal party quota in 1972, followed by a recommendation to place at least one woman in a safe seat on party lists in 1974. Party quotas were also introduced by the Green Party and the Left Party in 1987. Meanwhile, the Christian Democratic Party introduced a 40 per cent minimum recommendation for either sex in 1987. And in 1988, the Liberals took new action by recommending zipping –male and female candidates alternate on party lists (Freidenvall et al. 2006). However, it was not until 1993 that the largest left-wing party, the Social Democrats, introduced their zipper system –*varannan damernas*, 'every other one for the ladies'. This was largely due to the pressure exerted by an influential cross-party women's group known as the *Stodstrumporna*, the 'Support Stockings', that threatened to form a women's party if more women were not selected and elected (Freidenvall and Krook 2011). But it was also a strategic move, in response to fears that the Liberal Party's use of positive action measures might erode the party support from female voters (Freidenvall 2003). The Conservative and the Center Party, in contrast, have taken no concrete action, although they both set out a rhetorical goal for equal representation in the mid-1990s after their women's sections threatened to lobby for quotas if women public officers did not augment (Dahlerup 1988). Thus, in Sweden, competition over women's representation has spread to almost all of the parties.

In Iceland, in contrast, the particularities of its electoral and party system, combined with resistance to gender quotas in some of the main parties, have made it more difficult to set in motion processes of contagion. Unlike Sweden, women's

representation remained below 5 per cent until 1983. Some authors have attributed these initially low numbers to societal and cultural factors, with Icelandic society characterized by a strong male-breadwinner model based on agriculture and fishery (Bergqvist et al 1999), while others have highlighted the lack of effective coordination between party women's sections and the wider women's movement (Styrkársdóttir 2013). As in Sweden, strong quotas were first introduced by left-wing parties. The Left Party introduced a 40 per cent quota in the 1980s. However, substantial change did not occur until the Women's Alliance was formed, a women's party that competed in national elections from 1983 until 1999 to protest against prevailing social conditions, as well as the continuing slow progress in women's representation (Johnson et al. 2013).

The percentage of women parliamentarians rose considerably in the period of the Women's Alliance operation, a large number of whom were party representatives –from 5 per cent in 1983 to 25.4 per cent in 1995 (see Table 4). Initially, though, the only other party to have addressed the issue of women's representation was the left-wing National Party, a small left-wing party which subsequently joined the larger Social Democratic Alliance. In the first elections the party contested in 1995, it adopted the Swedish system of 'varannan damernas', which proved to be highly effective but its low number of seats brought about no significant change in the composition of the parliament (Styrkársdóttir 1999). When in 1999 the Women's Alliance fractured and was absorbed by the Social Democratic Alliance and the Left-Green Alliance both parties subsequently adopted 40 per cent quotas for party lists. Finally, in 2005, the Progressive Party passed a 40-per-cent quota.

Despite these gains, processes of contagion have been limited. The Icelandic party system is anomalous in Scandinavia in that the Social Democratic Alliance is one of the smallest of the four major parties and the largest party, the Independence Party (IP), is the farthest to the right and strongly rejects quotas, followed by the centrist Progressive Party (Styrkársdóttir 2013). These dynamics are compounded by the open primary system for nominating candidates, used by most of the major parties since the 1970s, through which candidates are ranked in party lists according to the share of votes received (Indriõason and Kristinsson 2013). As Styrkársdóttir (1999, 2013) points out, this system disadvantages women since they are less likely to possess the financial and political resources needed to put themselves forward for the primaries, particularly the informal and clientelist networks needed to support their candidature. It has also

resulted in a highly decentralized process, in which the decision to mount trial ballots is made by local party branches, reducing the overall effectiveness of gender quotas.

The recent economic collapse, however, resulted in an ideological shift in Icelandic politics which briefly opened up new windows for women's representation. While women were only 37 per cent of candidates in the 1999 elections, the proportion of female MPs increased from 32 to 43 per cent (Erlingsdóttir 2013). This increase can be explained by the rise of the left – for the first time in Icelandic history, leftist parties gained a parliamentary majority. In 2013, however the centre-right Independence Party and Progressive Party returned to power and women's representation dropped to 39.7 per cent, as shown in Table 4. In Sweden, a similar small drop in women's representation occurred in the recent 2010 elections (from 47.3 per cent to 45 per cent), also partly due to the entry of the far-right male-dominated Sweden Democrats into parliament, which only has 15 per cent women MPs (see Table 3). But, the number of women MPs also decreased in the Liberal Party and the Centre Party. This can largely be explained by party magnitude. While larger parties like the Social Democratic Party and the Moderate Party obtained multiple seats in most districts, most of the smaller parties won a maximum of one, the majority of which were men. This reflects a wider overall trend of increased party system competition, in which the Social Democrats have lost their advantage over Conservative and new parties over time (Arter 2012), a shift which has inhibited the effectiveness of gender quotas.

Austria and Belgium

Among PR countries, Austria and Belgium began the 1980s with low levels of women MPs, below 10 per cent. Yet, while in 1990 Austria had reached 19.7 per cent, Belgium did not attain similar levels until the late 1990s. In the next decade, though, the trends reversed. Women's representation in Austria stagnated, whereas Belgium experienced a steady increase. In both countries, innovation was not led by small left-wing parties but by the larger parties with the strongest women's sections. The Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V) adopted in 1974 a target of at least one eligible seat for women and in 1975 of 20 per cent of women on lists[6] (Meier 2004: 588-90), and the Austrian Social Democrats (SPÖ) introduced in 1985 a 25-per-cent quota (Rosenberger 1998: 107).

[6] Targets only applied to local elections until 1999. Yet. CD&V women MPs also pioneered the introduction of bills stipulating gender quotas since 1980 (see Meier 2005: 43-4).

To what extent did other parties 'catch up'? In Austria, the SPÖ honored its quota in candidate tickets but women were not placed in winnable positions in the 1986 elections, so no significant increase was observed. In 1986, the Greens (GA) made it to parliament and applied parity in the district party lists and zipping in Land lists. Competition from its left flank thus might have stimulated the SPÖ to enforce its gender quota also competition from the Liberals (both the FPÖ and the LF, a split from the fomer) which in the 1990s promoted women candidates in order to boost the party appeal among female voters, despite rejecting quotas (Steininger 2000a: 85-87). As can be seen in Table 5, in 1990 the SPÖ almost doubled its percentage of women MPs and in 1993 set a 40 per cent quota for either sex –to be implemented in ten years– out of pressure from its women's section. In 1995 the Greens fixed a quota of a minimum of 50 per cent women (Neyer 1996: 93). The Greens are the only party to have translated internal provisions into effective representation. Conversely, the Christian Democrats (ÖVP) have lagged behind. ÖVP women candidates have significantly grown since 1990 but party selectors did not place them in safe seats, which is largely explained by the weakness of the women's section vis-à-vis other intra-party groups, such as the Farmers, Business, and Workers Leagues. For this reason, the 1995 party program assumed a 30 per cent quota for women (Steininger 2000a: 90-2). While not enshrined in party statutes, it still produced notable increases (see Table 5).

(INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE)

In the Belgian case, the party system is strongly regionalized after statewide parties disappeared in the late 1960s-1970s, so party competition needs to be examined in both Flanders and Wallonia. The Flemish Greens (Grone) were the second party to introduce a 50 per cent quota in 1985 (right after its foundation). Contrary to contagion theory, the Flemish Social Democrats (SP.A) did not get 'caught up' in competition from its left flank until 1992 when quotas were also adopted (establishing 25 per cent of list positions for women). In practice, however, they were not enforced, as the levels of women MPs indicate (see Table 6). The 20 per cent quota the Flemish Liberals (VLD) used 1985 and 1993 also failed to produce significant change. In Wallonia, targets were adopted by the Christian Democrats (CDH) in 1986 –aiming for at least one-third of women candidates and one woman among the top three candidates– and by the Greens (Ecolo) in 1993 –zipping applied to the first two positions. The Francophone Social

Democrats (PS) were not incentivised either by party competition and were one of the worst performers on women's representation throughout the 1980-1990s (Meier 2004).

(INSERT TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE)

In Austria the peak in women's representation was attained in 2002 with 33.9 per cent women MPs, falling to 27.3 per cent in 2008. Since 2002, both the SPÖ and the ÖVP have suffered a loss of seats to minor parties. With the exception of the Greens, women's representation is not a salient issue for the BZÖ, a populist rightist party that splitted from the FPÖ, whose promotion of women candidates has also vanished. This has negatively impacted on the largest parties' will to enforce their gender quotas to all party branches, given the resulting decrease in party magnitudes. Under the Austrian electoral system, over 50 per cent of the seats are filled in the first tier (regional/district level) mainly with SPÖ and ÖVP candidates, since low district magnitude (4.3) prevents minor parties from obtaining seats. The second tier (Land) elects about a third of seats, and the third tier (federal) about 10 per cent. Candidate lists at the regional and Land districts basically overlap, which grants district and Land party branches the chance to ensure that safe seats go to their top candidates[7] (Müller 2005: 404-5). In the ÖVP, candidate selection is managed by Land branches, which can override a federal party veto on the list ranking, and by socioeconomic intra-party groups[8], which rarely nominate women among the winnable list positions they control. In the SPÖ, the Land branches also play a strong role in selection processes and hold many seats in the national party executive. While the SPÖ and ÖVP national executives have the power to select 20 per cent and 10 per cent of candidates in the federal party list (Detterbeck 2012), this capacity fails to grant women enough electable positions to meet their quotas, leading their women's sections to mobilize for zipping in the 2013 elections.

With regards to Belgium, in 1994 a legislative quota was passed stipulating a maximum of two-thirds of candidates of either sex –first enforced at the federal level in 1999 (Meier 2004: 595). All parties met the requirement as non-compliant lists faced withdrawal but the increase from 12 per cent to 19 per cent women MPs in the immediate post-legislative quota elections was not a breakthrough (Carton 2001). The loss of seats suffered by the Francophone Christian Democrats and Social-democratic

[7] The "safe-seat" principle works as a sort of "reelection quota" that protects incumbents and thus hinders women's chances of getting into these positions (Neyer 1996: 99).
[8] This is also the case among the SPÖ trade union party section (Neyer, 1996: 102).

parties in both regions resulted in a decrease in their levels of women MPs, due to the gender-biased allocation of safe positions in both party lists and alternate lists –used when an MP resigns or elected candidates face an incompatibility mandate (Mateo Díaz 2002: 91-3, De Winter 2005: 423). The weakness of party women's sections also prevented them from securing more safe seats for women in a context of high party fragmentation. Party magnitude in most districts in the period 1995-1999 was up to three with an average of two seats per party (7.5 average district magnitude)[9].

Following the 1999 elections some parties broadened their equality strategies and even surpassed the prescribed proportions of the 1994 quotas act. In Flanders, the Liberals introduced zipping for all elections; and, in Wallonia, the Greens assumed a 50 per cent target and the Social Democrats a 50 per cent quota. Extended cross-party commitment also instilled the passing of a new quota act in 2002 setting an equal number of fe/male candidates on party lists and imposing a placement mandate, a sort of 'double quota' that most parties were already using. The first two positions of party lists cannot be occupied by candidates of the same sex, with a temporary limitation to the first three positions in 2003 (Meier 2004: 589-91). In 2003 the number of districts was reduced from 20 to 11, making them coincide with the provincial boundaries. Average district magnitude increased to 12.6, which positively affected women's representation, as districts where party magnitude was just one seat –usually allocated to a man– almost disappeared. However, the alternation mandate in the first two positions of party lists now fails to reach the increased district size and the corresponding larger party magnitudes, thus limiting the effect of the legislative quota (Meier et al. 2006: 6).

The evolution of women's representation in Belgium also points at the key role of intra-party dynamics. Until the early 2000s, candidate selection basically fell in most parties under the responsibility of constituency parties (De Winter 1988), which did not effectively enforce the positive action measures. The reduction of districts in 2003 was coupled with an increased centralization of candidate selection processes (De Winter 2005: 425-6), thus explaining that, once parties were committed to gender equality in political office, effective outcomes could be observed. The 2003 elections brought 34.7 per cent women MPs, an 80 per cent increase from the previous election. It should be emphasized, though, that parties with the highest number of elected women are the ones

[9] The 1993 electoral reform reduced the number of districts from 30 to 20 but since the number of seats of the lower house shrank from 212 to 150 average district magnitude (7.5) was not altered (Pilet 2013).

that win the most votes, which are not necessarily those having pioneered positive action, confirming again the explanatory power of party magnitude.

Concerning type of lists, in both Belgium (multiple) and Austria (one) preferential voting allows voters to alter the rank order of candidates in the list but, at the federal level, voters usually give their preferential votes to the top candidates (De Winter 2005: 422; Müller 2005: 410). This highlights the fact that placement of women candidates in party lists is not only relevant with closed lists but also in open-list systems. Even with open lists, what matters most is party selectors' preferences and and their commitment to promoting women's representation.

Portugal and Spain

In the early 1980s Portugal and Spain had 6-7 per cent of women MPs in their national parliaments. Despite sharing similar political, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds as well as welfare regimes and electoral systems (closed party lists and comparable district magnitude), the longitudinal evolution of women's representation significantly differs. In the mid-1990s levels of women parliamentarians took off in Spain while they remained relatively low in Portugal. As can be seen in Tables 7 and 8, in 1999 Portugal elected 19 per cent women MPs while Spain already attained 28 per cent in 2000, although party gender quotas had been used for over a decade.

In 1988 Social Democrats in Portugal (PS) and in Spain (PSOE) pioneered the introduction of quotas granting women 25 per cent of positions on party lists (Espírito-Santo 2006: 42; Verge 2006: 170). While in Portugal quota reform was initiated by key feminist activists within the PS who gained the support of the party leader, in Spain the PSOE's women's section undertook a successful lobbying campaign, which emphasized the gender voting gap that benefited the right, helped by the party feminists leading at the time the national women's policy agency (Valiente 2005; Threlfall 2007). The PSOE immediately honored the proportion established by its quota on party lists but the PS needed over a decade to do so (Meirinho Martins and Teixeira 2005: 150; Verge 2006: 179). Yet, both quota proportions failed to attain effective representation. PR closed-list systems facilitate the incorporation of women as far as female candidates are placed in winnable positions. While commitment with quotas by constituency parties might have been initially lower than that of central party levels, highly centralized candidate selection process means that the PS and the PSOE can rather easily enforce reforms top-down if the party leadership is willing to. Constituency parties draft the

candidate tickets at the district level but national party bodies approve the lists, hold veto power –especially on the first positions of the list– and can change the order of candidates[10] (Freire and Pequito 2011; Kenny and Verge 2013).

Quota innovation was not led by party competition with small left-wing parties. Indeed, during the 1980s the two Social Democratic parties barely experienced competition from their left flank. Communist parties were suffering a steady electoral decline and the relatively low district magnitude only allowed them to win seats in the larger districts. The Portuguese Communists (PCP) rejected quotas but still nominated and elected more women than the PS thanks to softer measures (Viegas and Faria 1999: 73). As to the Spanish Communists (PCE), levels of women candidates were similar to PSOE's. In 1986 the PCE joined the coalition United Left (IU) which in 1989 also assumed a 25-per-cent quota for women[11] but female candidates have barely received any of the few safe seats the IU has usually obtained (Verge 2006: 180).

(INSERT TABLE 7 ABOUT HERE)

In Spain, since the mid-1990s the PSOE and the IU followed a parallel evolution with regards to gender quotas. In 1997 both parties adopted parity (neither sex below 40 per cent nor above 60 per cent of positions in electoral lists). Since then, all parties (including non statewide parties) but the rightist PP have adopted quotas (Verge 2012: 399). Despite the electoral gains made by IU, quota reforms were not led by increased electoral competition between the two parties. In 1994, PSOE's women's section had not only managed to have the quota enforced in winnable positions but the party leadership already committed to adopt parity in the next party conference. Furthermore, the PSOE was more incentivised to pursue further reforms by competition with the PP than with its left flank, especially after passing into opposition in 1996, as a means to present itself as the champion of gender equality before female voters.

In Portugal, although the PS quota was adopted while the party was in opposition, rivalry on equality strategies only emerged in the late 1990s after the creation of the Left Bloc (BE) which fielded about 40 per cent women candidates in

[10] This is also the case of all other Spanish and Portuguese parties with the exception of the BE with quite decentralized candidate selection is. In the PS the National Political Commission can even nominate 30 per cent of candidates –who are generally placed in top positions of the lists (Freire and Pequito 2011).

[11] The PCE adopted a 25-per-cent gender quota in 1987 but never applied it to electoral lists since in all successive elections the party has integrated into IU. The first party to pioneer gender quotas in Spain was actually the Party of the Catalan Socialists (PSC), a party federated with the PSOE in the region of Catalonia, which reserved in 1982 12 per cent of positions for women in party lists (Verge 2012).

party lists thanks to a target for women's representation (Baum and Espírito-Santo 2012: 328). In 1999, the PS, for the first time, met its own quota in the composition of party lists. However, it should be noted that the issue of parity was put on the political agenda by women's organizations in concert with the national women's policy agency (Monteiro 2011). After recovering the government, the PS passed a constitutional reform in 1997 that incorporates as a fundamental task of the state the promotion of gender equality, thus paving the way for legislative quotas. As in the Spanish case, the bills presented in the following years by leftist parties were rejected by the parliament since right-wing parties held the majority of seats[12] (Verge 2013).

The extent to which contagion is observed within the two party systems as well as its different speed and depth cannot be explained by electoral system features. District magnitude is, on average, lower in Spain (6.7 seats) than in Portugal (10.4) but party magnitude is relatively similar. In over 70 per cent of districts usually only the two largest parties obtain seats. As Tables 7 and 8 show, the main Portuguese and Spanish right-wing parties, despite strong opposition to quotas, have reacted to their main competitors' strategies by selecting more women candidates thereby gradually increasing their levels of women MPs. Nonetheless, since pressure on equality in representation among their Social Democratic competitors has been higher in Spain, the speed of contagion to the right has also been higher in this country.

(INSERT TABLE 8 ABOUT HERE)

Recently, both countries introduced legislative quotas. In 2003 the PS quota was enlarged to a third of positions for either sex. In the 2005 thanks to the supervision of the distribution of winnable positions the PS elected 29 per cent women MPs. The women's policy agency was a relevant actor in providing party women with a platform for lobbying for parity, which compensated for the structural weakness of the party women's sections, along with sustained influence by the EU (Baum and Espírito-Santo 2012: 331). The PS *Lei de Paridade* was passed in 2006. It sets a third of positions on party lists for either sex. In Spain, the PSOE promoted the Equality Act (2007) which imposes on party lists the gender-neutral proportions of 40-60 per cent. Whereas in

[12] The PS and the BE did not support each other's bill out of discrepancies on the reform of the electoral system –the BE regarded the expansion of the number of single-member districts as exclusively beneficial to the largest parties (Baum and Espírito-Santo 2012: 325).

Spain non compliance entails the withdrawal of party lists, in Portugal, parties face the reduction of public subsidies for the electoral campaign (Verge 2013).

Although statutory quotas have brought about the largest increases among right-wing parties, the gender-biased allocation of safe seats prevents the statutory quota from being truly effective. Only the PSOE and the BE are watchful in this aspect. In 2011 women's representation reached 26.5 per cent in Portugal and 35.4 per cent in Spain. In elections where both Social Democratic parties suffered severe seat losses, the PS elected 24 per cent of women and the PSOE 39 per cent. This highlights not only a different degree of commitment by the respective party leaderships but also the limitations of the current gender quota acts since party magnitude is on average lower than the placement mandates established by the legislative quotas –no sex shall occupy more than two consecutive positions in Portugal and the 40-60 proportion must also be applied in every stretch of five candidates in Spain.

Conclusions

The longitudinal survey of women's representation in a cross-sectional sample of West European countries using PR electoral systems has shown that dynamics of diffusion and competition have had varying degrees of reach and effectiveness. While PR might facilitate processes of contagion, our comparative empirical analysis has allowed us to measure to what extent the key tenets of the 'contagion theory' are supported by empirical evidence. Our analysis suggests that the central assumptions of contagion theory need to be qualified. The cases examined under the three pair comparisons do not meet the expectation that small leftist parties will take the lead on promoting women's candidates. Actually, the evidence is mixed, as shown in Table 9. While in Iceland women's parties were the 'patient zero', in Sweden and Belgium non 'usual suspects' such as Liberal or Christian Democratic parties, respectively, led innovation (in the form of soft quotas), and in Austria, Spain and Portugal gender quotas were pioneered by Social Democratic parties. Also, levels of women's representation have generally increased faster and reached higher levels if the main leftist parties are committed to gender equality in representation. From their central position in the party system, these parties can instil processes of contagion to the left and to the right. Their innovation or early adaptation is led to a large extent to electoral competition or to their will to close the gender gap in voting.

(INSERT TABLE 9 ABOUT HERE)

We cannot assume, however, that quotas will necessarily diffuse across the political system. While we see evidence of wide contagion across the ideological spectrum in Sweden, Austria, Belgium and Spain, in Iceland and Portugal, contagion across the party system has been either low or moderate. Increases in women's representation are generally observed, again, when the party leadership is not only willing but also able to enforce the party's equality strategies. In this vein, the reach of contagion is wider when the catalyst and or early adapter parties implement either soft or hard quotas effectively thus showing to their competitors that their commitment to equal gender representation is not an empty gesture. Mobilized party women's groups and centralization of candidate selection are key factors in effective quota implementation and even mediate the impact of other external variables such as type of list in use. Thus, parties are not simply responding to external pressures to do with electoral competition, but are also affected by intra-party pressures. As such, a more dynamic model of the contagion effect is needed that considers how both exogenous and endogenous opportunity structures impact on party decisions to promote women's representation.

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Tables and Graphs

Table 1. Revised theoretical expectations of contagion theory

Theoretical expectations	Logic	Factors
Catalyst party	Innovation	Electoral prospects (H1) Strength of women's sections (H2)
Reach	Degree of spread	Competitive position of catalyst party (H3) Effective implementation of quotas by catalyst /early adapter (H4)

Table 2. Party systems in selected countries (main state-wide parties)

	New left/ Communists	*Social-Democrats*	*Liberals*	*Christian-Democrats*	*Right*	*New-right / Populist*
Sweden	V; MG	SAP	C; MS; FP	KD		SD
Iceland	LG	SDP; PA; SDA	PP		IP	
Austria	GA	SPÖ	FPÖ	ÖVP		BZÖ
Flanders	Groen	SP.A	VLD	CD&V		VB; LDD
Wallonia	Ecolo	PS	MR	CDH	PP	FN
Spain	PCE/IU	PSOE			PP	
Portugal	PCP; BE	PS		CDS-PP	PPD-PSD	

Table 3. Women deputies in the Swedish parliament (%)

	1979	*1982*	*1985*	*1988*	*1991*	*1994*	*1998*	*2002*	*2006*	*2010*
SDP	27	34	34	38	41	48	50	47.2	50	48.2
Moderate	16	22	17	19	22	22	25	40	43.3	47.6
Green	-	-		45	-	44	50	58.8	52.6	56
Liberal	24	10	39	43	36	35	35	47.9	50	41.7
Centre	31	33	32	38	32	37	56	50	37.9	30.4
SD	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	15
Left	25	15	16	38	31	45	42	46.7	63.6	57.9
KD	-	-	-	-	27	33	41	30.3	37.5	36.8
ND	-	-	-	-	12	-	-	-		
Total	26.3	27.5	29.8	38.1	33.5	40.4	42.7	45.3	47.3	45

Source: Own elaboration based on IPU PARLINE database; Bergqvist et al (1999)
Acronyms: SDP (Swedish Social Democrats); SD (Sweden Democrats); KD (Christian Democrats); New Democracy (ND).

Table 4. Women deputies in the Icelandic parliament (%)

	1979	*1983*	*1987*	*1991*	*1995*	*1999*	*2003*	*2007*	*2009*	*2013*
IP	4.5	8.7	11.1	15.4	16.0	30.8	18.2	32.0	31.3	31.6
PP	0.0	0.0	7.7	15.4	20.0	25.0	33.3	28.6	33.3	42.1
PA	9.1	10.0	25.0	22.2	22.2	-	-	-	-	-
SDA	-	-	-	-	-	52.9	45	33.3	50.0	44.4
LG	-	-	-	-	-	33.3	40	44.4	50.0	57.1
SDP	10.0	16.7	10.0	20.0	14.3	-	-	-	-	-
WA	-	100	100	100	100	-	-	-	-	-
Total	5.0	15.0	20.6	23.8	25.4	34.9	30.2	31.7	42.9	39.7

Source: Own elaboration based on Althingi (2013).
Acronyms: IP (Independence Party); PP (Progressive Party); SDA (Social Democratic Alliance); LG (Left-Green Movement); SDP (Social Democratic Party); WA (Women's Alliance); PA (People's Alliance: coalition of Communist and Social Democratic parties transformed later on into the SDA, including the SDP).

Table 5. Women deputies in the Austrian parliament (%)

	1979	*1983*	*1986*	*1990*	*1994*	*1995*	*1999*	*2002*	*2006*	*2008*
SPÖ	11.6	8.9	12.5	21.3	21.5	28.2	33.8	34.8	n.a.	33.3
ÖVP	9.1	9.9	9.1	11.6	13.5	22.6	19.2	29.1	n.a.	25.5
FPÖ	0.0	8.3	16.7	21.2	21.4	17.5	24.4	27.8	9.5	17.7
GA	--	--	12.5	50.0	46.2	44.4	66.7	58.8	n.a.	50.0
LF	--	--	--	--	36.4	40.0	40.0	--	--	--
BZÖ	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	14.3	9.5
Total	9.8	9.3	11.5	19.7	21.9	25.7	27.8	33.9	31.2	27.3

Source: Own elaboration based on Steininger (2000b) and Austrian national parliament.
Acronyms: SPÖ (Social Democratic Party); ÖVP (Austrian People's Party); FPÖ (Freedom Party of Austria); GA (The Green Alternative); LF (Liberal Forum); BZÖ (The Alliance for the Future of Austria).

Table 6. Women deputies in the Belgian parliament (%)

		1981	*1985*	*1987*	*1991*	*1995*	*1999*	*2003*	*2005*	*2010*
Wallonia	MR	0.0	4.2	0.0	10.0	21.8	22.2	41.6	34.8	33.3
	FDF	16.7	33.3	33.3	33.3	--[a]	--	--	--	--
	PS	2.9	2.9	5.0	8.6	16.3	10.5	40.0	30.0	30.8
	CDH	0.0	10.0	5.3	11.1	18.0	10.0	25.0	40.0	44.4
	Ecolo	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	25.9	54.5	50.0	50.0	50.0
	FN	--	--	--	0.0	--	0.0	0.0	--	--
	PP	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	0.0
Flanders	VLD	7.1	4.5	4.0	11.1	17.2	17.4	36.0	33.3	46.1
	SP.A	3.8	6.3	12.5	0.0	16.1	0.0	39.1	35.7	46.1
	CD&V	14.0	12.2	14.0	20.0	23.1	18.2	28.5	33.0	35.3
	Greens	0.0	25.0	16.7	42.9	28.6	44.4	--	50.0	40.0
	VB	0.0	0.0	0.0	8.3	6.1	6.6	22.2	41.2	33.3
	N-VA	0.0	5.3	12.5	0.0	11.1	37.5	28.5	--[b]	48.1
	LDD	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	40.0	0.0
	Total	5.4	7.5	7.5	9.4	12.0	19.3	34.7	36.7	39.3

Source: Own elaboration based on Van Molle and Gubin (1998), IEFH (2003 and 2010).
[a] FDF integrated in MR in the 1995-2010 elections. [b] Coalition CD&V / NV-A in 2003.
Acronyms: Only most recent party name is reported. In Wallonia, MR (Reformist Movement); FDF (Francophone Democratic Federalists); PS (Socialist Party); CDH (Humanist Democratic Centre); Ecolo (Confederal Ecologists); FN (National Front); PP (Popular Party). In Flanders, VLD (Flemish Liberals and Democrats); SP.A (Different Socialist Party); CD&V (Christian Democratic and Flemish); VB (Flemish Interest); New Flemish Alliance (N-VA); Greens (Groen).

Table 7. Women deputies in the Spanish parliament (%)

	1982	*1986*	*1989*	*1993*	*1996*	*2000*	*2004*	*2008*	*2011*
PSOE	6.9	7.1	17.1	17.6	27.7	36.8	46.3	42.3	39.1
PP	0.9	5.9	10.4	14.9	14.3	25.1	28.4	30.5	36.2
PCE/IU	0.0	0.0	11.0	22.0	33.0	25.0	40.0	0.0	28.6
Total	5.9	8.4	13.9	16.0	24.0	28.3	36.0	36.2	35.4

Source: Verge (2013).
Acronyms: PSOE (Partido Socialista Obrero Español); PP (Partido Popular); PCE (Partido Comunista de España)/from 1986 onwards included in IU (Izquierda Unida). Non state-wide parties are included in the total percentage of women deputies per election year.

Table 8. Women deputies in the Portuguese parliament (%)

	1983	*1985*	*1987*	*1991*	*1995*	*1999*	*2002*	*2005*	*2009*	*2011*
PS	4.0	1.8	6.7	9.7	13.4	20.0	23.2	28.9	29.1	24.3
PPD-PSD	9.3	5.7	6.8	6.7	8.0	14.8	17.1	8.0	26.9	28.7
BE	--	--	--	--	--	0.0[b]	0.0[b]	50.0	37.5	50.0
CDS-PP	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	20.0	6.7	6.7	8.3	19.0	20.8
PCP	13.6	18.4	12.9	17.6	26.7	29.4	36.4	16.7	20.0	18.8
Total	7.2	6.4	7.6	8.7	12.2	18.7	19.1	21.3	27.8	26.5

Source: Verge (2013).
Acronyms: BE (Left Block); CDS-PP (Social Democratic Centre – Popular Party); PCP (Portuguese Communist Party); PS (Socialist Party); PPD-PSD (Democratic Popular Party-Social Democratic Party).
[a] Coalition CDS-PP/PPD-PSD. [b] Due to the low number of elected deputies in 1999 (2) and 2002 (3), the BE adopted a rotation system through which some women gained a seat for a certain period.

Table 9. Summary of findings

	PAIR 1		PAIR 2		PAIR 3	
	Sweden	Iceland	Austria	Belgium	Spain	Portugal
Women deputies 1980s	26.3%	5.0%	9.8%	5.4%	5.9%	7.2%
Women deputies 2010s	45.0%	39.7%	27.3%	39.3%	35.4%	26.5%
Catalyst party	Liberals SD early adapter	(Left Party) Women's Party	Social Dem. (SD)	Flemish Christian Dem. (CD)	SD	SD
Electoral prospects (H1)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Women's sections strong (H2)	Yes	No	No	No (only in Flemish CD)	Yes	No
Reach	Wide	Low	Initially wide	Wide but slow	Wide	Moderate
Central position of catalyst party (H3)	Yes	No (until recently)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Effective implement. of quotas by catalyst /early adapter (H4)	Yes	Yes (but innovators too small)	No	Moderate (until legislative quota enforced)	Yes	No