



EUROPEAN POLICY ANALYSIS

Women at the Top of the European Commission – Drivers and Barriers

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Summary

To date there have been more than 60 women working in the top-level positions in the European Commission. This paper provides an overview of women's representation in the European Commission. It uses descriptive analysis of original data to show that women's leadership in the Commission developed late – with virtually no women at its apex in the first thirty-five years of integration – and ascended to roughly 40% of top positions today.

Horizontal gender divides show that women in the Commission lead not only classical 'feminine' portfolios but also economic and foreign policy portfolios. The procedures and policies of the Commission provide an administrative and a political path to leadership. Along these paths, individual factors like nationality and former qualifications explain observable patterns of women's positional leadership.

We conclude with examples and suggestions of how central actors could achieve more gender balance and diversity in the future: the Commission could work with its personnel policy, with a special focus on horizontal gender divides and national backgrounds; the European Union (EU) institutions could join efforts by linking the demand for women candidates from member states to the EP right of scrutiny and consent in the appointment process; national governments could target societal norms and attitudes towards women in top political positions and establish a pool of experienced female politicians; and women's networks across the EU institutions could assure that equality principles are not traded off against partisan interests.

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1. Introduction

Since the first Hallstein Commission in 1958, a total of 201 Commissioners and 229 Director Generals have worked in the Commission. Yet the first 30 years of integration saw neither a female Commissioner nor a female Director General. Numbers started to rise only in the late 1980s. From the Delors II Commission onward, more and more women have been found in the highest positions. Some of them are well known and have received individual attention beyond their country of origin, such as Federica Mogherini or Ursula von der Leyen, Viviane Reding, Margot Wallström or Margrethe Vestager. Nevertheless, there is little systematic consideration of female representation in the Commission; by contrast, we face a startling lack of research on female politicians at the political and administrative top of the European Union (EU) Commission. When, where and how do women enter leadership positions in the Commission and what are drivers and barriers to women's success in the Commission?¹

The European Commission is a central actor in the EU political system, where it holds a quasi-monopoly to propose legislation and, as guardian of the treaties, oversees member states' implementation of EU policies. The Commission's leadership positions are extremely powerful and expected to play central roles in making and executing EU policies.

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Neglecting the role of women in the Commission's leadership positions gives an incomplete picture of how equality principles and the substantive representation of women are accomplished. Today it is widely accepted that women should share equally with men in politics. Yet, this basic normative principle is seldom achieved in Western

democracies – despite the fact that 2021 marks more than one hundred years of women's suffrage in several countries! If the EU wants to live up to its own normative standards, it is necessary to represent women in decision-making processes in all policy areas. The EU itself has been an advocate of equal-treatment policies and gender mainstreaming – but how well does the EU Commission fare in its own ranks?

Addressing these questions is relevant not only for normative considerations of equality. Rather, it is frequently argued that diversity makes political decisions better (Barnes & Holman 2020). Female politicians often put emphasis on otherwise neglected topics and might advance different policy making styles than male politicians (Kittilson 2010; Holman 2015). Take the example of EU anti-discrimination policy, where alliances between women in the Commission, national executives and responsible committees in the European Parliament, supported by expert networks, greatly contributed to pushing forward the development of equal-treatment directives from the 1970s onwards (Mazey 1988; Woodward 2004). Another example is EU foreign policy, where the share of women in peace missions has greatly contributed to the coverage and acceptance of investigations in sexual and gender-based violence in armed conflict (D'Almeida et al. 2017). Thus, a more systematic analysis of women in the EU Commission is the basis for a better understanding of when and how the EU addresses specific problems and how successful it is in solving them.

2. The When, Where and Who of Women's Representation in the European Commission

Women were clearly absent from power positions in the Commission in the early decades of integration. The first women entered the College of Commissioners with the Delors II Commission in 1989: Vasso Papandreou from Greece and Christiane Scrivener from France. A little later, in 1990, the first female Director General, Colette Flesch from Luxembourg, followed on

¹ This policy analysis draws on and updates a chapter published as Hartlapp, M., & Blome, A. (forthcoming). Women's Positional Leadership in the European Commission: When, Where and How? In H. Müller & I. Tömmel (Eds.), *Women and leadership in the European Union*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

the administrative side. From then on, numbers started to rise. Data from the PEU database² show that progress is clearly evident, with virtually no women at its apex in the first thirty-five years of integration, and a striking increase over time – from 12% under Delors II to almost parity in the current von der Leyen Commission after the nomination of Mairead McGuinness as new Irish Commissioner in September 2020 (48%). However, patterns spread out unevenly across the political and administrative top as well as between portfolios and nationalities.

2.1 When: The Rise of Female Commissioners and Director Generals

Patterns differ substantially between political and administrative positions. Commissioners make decisions in the College of Commissioners and give political guidance to their portfolios, the Directorates General (DGs). Most DGs are organized in sectoral responsibilities to develop, implement and manage EU policies. Each DG is headed by a Director General reporting to the responsible Commissioner. In the College of Commissioners, numbers started to rise earlier than at the administrative top. There were five women in the Santer and Prodi Colleges. During this period, female Commissioners were largely nominated by the big member states, which each had two positions at their disposal.

Thus, under Delors, Christiane Scrivener acceded to the Commission on the ‘second ticket’ from France. The same held true for Edith Cresson from France, Emma Bonino from Italy and Monika Wulf-Mathies from Germany under Santer, as well as Loyola de Palacio and Michaele Schreyer under Prodi. This practice ended with the Nice Treaty coming into force in 2004, which reduced the number of Commissioners to one per country. Thus, where governments once sent women in addition to men, starting with Barroso, women were more often sent instead of men.

However, women’s share of Commissioners in the two Barroso Commissions and the following Juncker Commission never surpassed 35% (eight, ten and nine women, respectively). This is partly due to enlargement, as the greater number of Commissioners overall (including many new male Commissioners) ‘consumed’ the effect of women’s greater representation from older members. Female empowerment at the political top of the Commission gained traction again with Ursula von der Leyen (13 women, 48%). Overall, female accession has seen upswings and relative stagnation, with absolute as well as relative figures growing significantly under Jacques Santer as well as under Ursula von der Leyen.

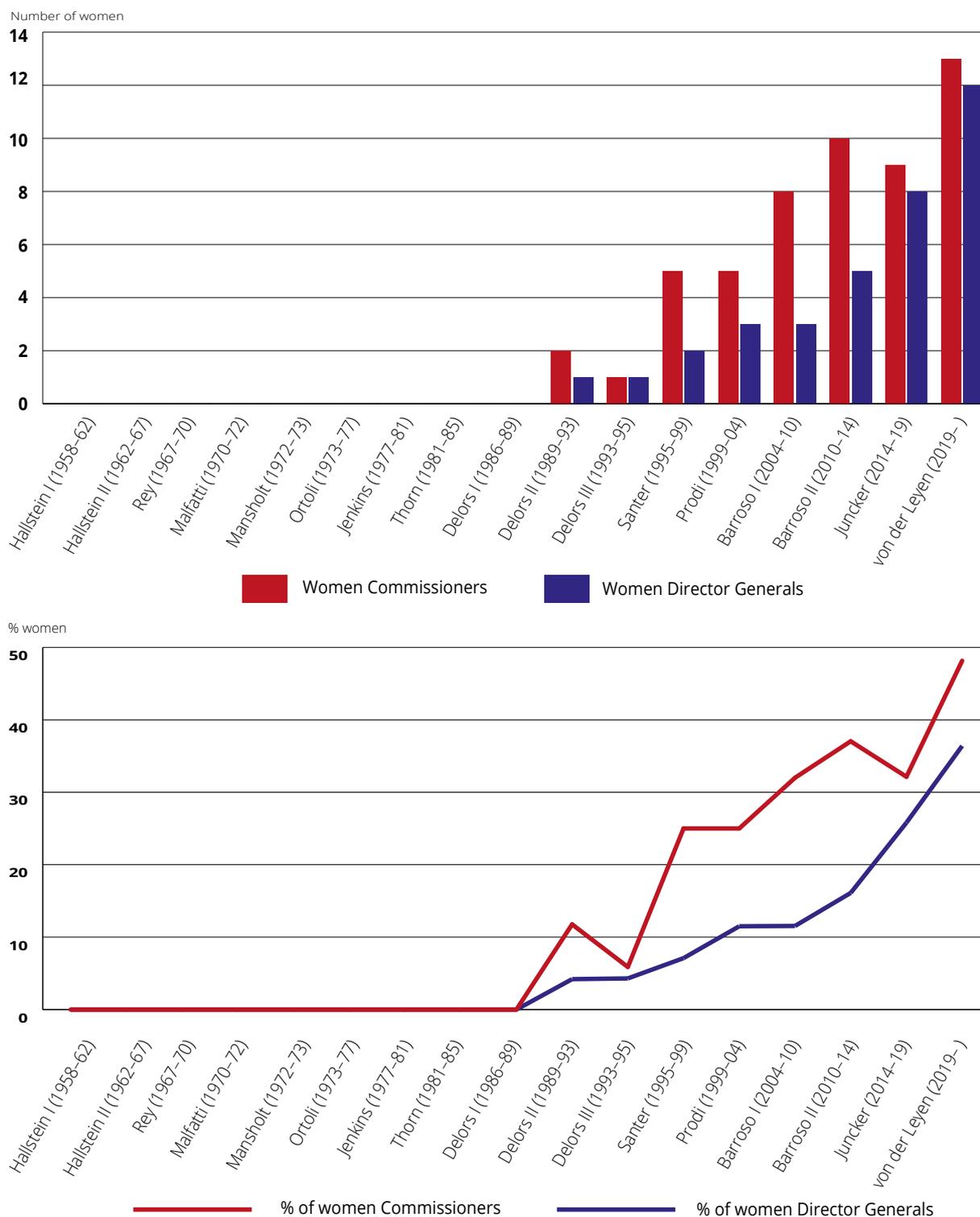
‘Overall, female accession has seen upswings and relative stagnation, with absolute as well as relative figures growing significantly under Jacques Santer as well as under Ursula von der Leyen.’

At the administrative top, women’s access to the Commission started at a similar time but shows a different dynamic. Shortly after the first female Commissioner was appointed, Colette Flesch followed as the first female Director General in 1990. Heading the DG for Communication, she remained the only female Director General under Delors III. At that time, the administrative base was strongly gender-biased, with female staff working as interpreters, translators and secretaries mostly. Women frequently faced structural and cultural barriers to enter higher management positions.³ In fact, the numbers of women at the administrative top remained exceptionally low over an extended period (two women under Santer, three under Prodi and Barroso I). A steady increase began with Barroso II (five women), continuing under Juncker (eight women) and von der Leyen (13 women).

² The PEU database is an output from a project studying position formation in the European Commission. It covers information about the administrative structure of the Commission DGs (official names, number of units and the names and number of directorates) as well as on all 428 persons who have been active as Commissioners and Directors General from 1958 to the end of 2020 (names, dates of birth, gender, nationality, party affiliation, professional background and post-Commission career as well as portfolio responsibilities). The database is regularly updated and can be accessed at <https://www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/en/polwiss/forschung/international/de-fr/Datenbanken/PEU-Datenbank/index.html>.

³ Historical Archives of the European Union, Oral History Programme, Entretien avec Jacqueline Nonan, 25 October 2010, p. 3–4, https://archives.eui.eu/en/oral_history/#ECM2 & Margot Delfosse, 25 October 2004, p. 3, https://archives.eui.eu/en/oral_history/INT672.

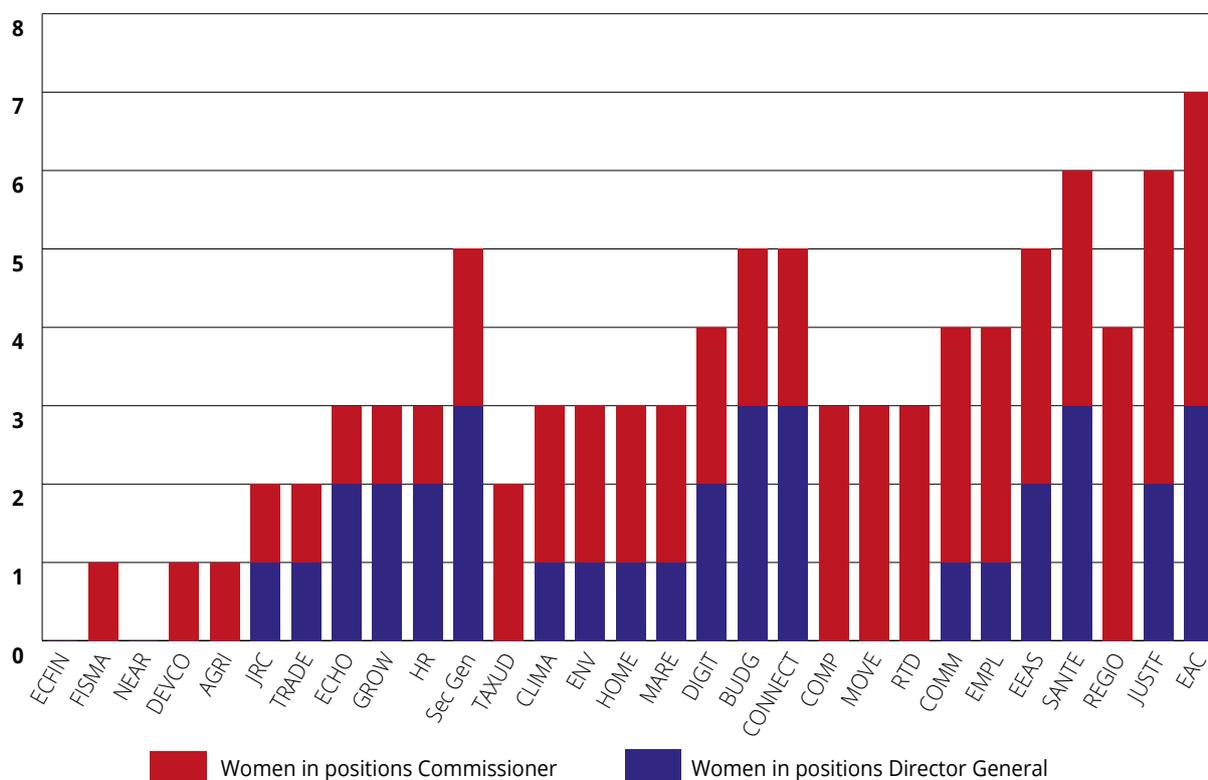
Figure 1: Women at the top of the Commission over time



Notes: We count women's terms with N = 87 (53 women Commissioners and 35 women Director Generals), including double entries of persons serving in more than one Commission. In cases where the person who holds an office changes during a term, we consider the person who served longer and exclude the other; e.g., Kristalina Georgieva is excluded as Budget Commissioner under Juncker. For the same reason, we do not consider women that served as 'acting' Director Generals at the cutoff date.

Source: own compilation (as of December 2020)

Figure 2: Women in the Commission by portfolio



Notes: We counted women's positions with N = 93 (35 positions for women Director Generals and 58 positions for women Commissioners), including double entries for persons holding more than one sectoral responsibility in a term. President not counted as she does not hold a sectoral responsibility. The Commission, of course, is an evolving institution. DGs have been subject to cuts and reassignments and have thus existed for different time spans—consequently affecting the odds of showing a high or low number of female positions.

Source: own compilation (as of December 2020)

This points to the relevance of structural and systemic change in the Commission administration that affects women's positional leadership. Overall, developments at the apex of the administration were more limited in the beginning. In the last two Commission terms, women have reached absolute numbers and shares in administrative leadership positions that are similar to the figures on the political side.

2.2 Where: Women in the Commission Lead Not Only 'Feminine' Portfolios

Horizontal gender divides show that women in the Commission lead not only classical 'feminine' portfolios⁴ but also economic and foreign policy portfolios. Where we consider the number of

women in leadership positions in each portfolio, a horizontal gender divide becomes visible.

Much like at the national level, more women are represented in those portfolios that are considered as 'feminine' in the literature: Education and Culture (EAC, seven positions in total), Health and Food Safety (SANTE, six positions in total) and Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL, four positions in total). Education, Health, Social and Employment are comparatively weak EU portfolios, as few competencies in these fields have been transferred to the supranational level and relevant policymaking is hampered by divergent member state interests. In contrast, the

⁴ The term is used in comparative politics to describe the fact that women often assume ministerial responsibility in areas closely associated with women's issues and the private sphere, i.e., so-called 'feminine portfolios', while men in cabinets are often found in areas associated with the public sphere, i.e., so-called 'masculine portfolios' (Krook & O'Brien, 2012, p. 844).

more powerful Economic Affairs (ECFIN) and Financial Affairs (FISMA) portfolios as well as the Enlargement (NEAR) portfolio have never been led by women.

Nevertheless, the Commission in other respects shows no clear-cut horizontal gender divide. This is visible not only where women in the Commission have accessed power positions in portfolios that are considered ‘masculine’, but even more so where they lead powerful and prestigious portfolios in the EU political system. Budget is a prime example: Commissioners Michaele Schreyer and Dailia Grybauskaitė as well as Director Generals Isabella Ventura, Edith Kitzmantel, and Nadia Calviño (BUDG, five positions total) lead the powerful portfolio, holding internal veto power on all Commission decisions concerning EU spending (Hartlapp et al. 2014: 256–257). Similarly, the High Representatives Catherine Ashton, Federica Mogherini and Secretary General Helga Schmid have led the prestigious European External Action Service (EEAS) since its foundation in 2010 and have left their mark on policymaking by pushing for involvement of women in decision-making as well as in EU policies (EEAS, five positions in total).

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Turning to differences between administrative and political leadership positions, we note that numerous portfolios have been led by female Commissioners, while all their Director Generals remain men. Regional Policy (REGIO, four positions), Research and Development (RTD, three positions), Mobility and Transport (MOVE, three positions) and Competition, with the prominent faces of Neelie Kroes and Margarethe Vestager (COMP, three positions), stand out in this regard. In the EU multilevel system, three of these portfolios can be considered particularly prestigious, as a substantial part of the EU budget runs through regional and research policy, while the EU holds strong competences in competition policy. Here, Brussels has a direct say on mergers and decides on the permissibility of state aid, e.g., to take on tech giants.

Women Commissioners seem more likely to lead these particularly powerful portfolios with hard competences than their female counterparts at the administrative top of the Commission. In contrast, among Director Generals, many of the portfolios with a higher number of women have few EU competences, like Education and Culture (EAC), Health and Consumer Protection (SANTE), and Communications (CONNECT, three positions each). But even at the administrative top, notable exceptions exist, with strong women’s leadership in the powerful portfolio of Budget (BUDG) and the highly prestigious Secretariat General (SecGen, three positions each), widely considered to be the power centre of the European Commission.

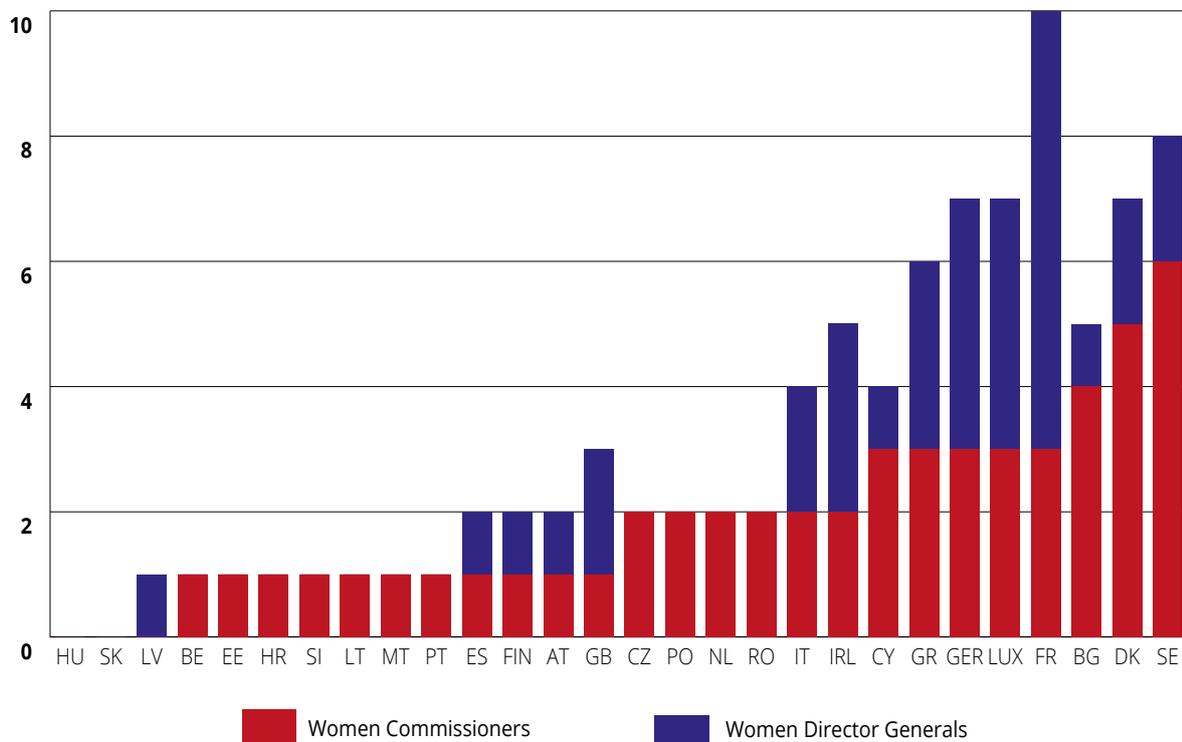
2.3 Who: The Distribution of Women’s Nationalities in the Commission

There are large cross-country differences in the frequency distributions of women’s nationalities at the political top of the Commission. When we consider the number of women in leadership positions in each Commission term, these terms range from zero for Hungarian and Slovakian women to six terms for female Commissioners from Sweden. Low numbers of terms for women are typical among countries from recent enlargement rounds (Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Malta, with one term each). On the other side, Swedish Commissioners are followed by Danish (five terms) and Bulgarian (four terms), then Commissioners from France, Luxembourg, Greece, Germany and Cyprus (three terms each).

The comparative politics literature suggests that these differences are due to a range of national factors impacting on the differences in the supply of potential candidates and the likelihood that specific governments will nominate women. With a larger pool of women in national politics, governments were more easily able to appoint politically experienced female candidates when the demand for female Commissioners increased in the beginning of the 1990s. The Scandinavian countries had cabinets with or close to parity early in the 1980s, while others still lag behind today (Stockemer 2007: 478).

As countries differ in how long they have been EU members, the figures are particularly remarkable for Sweden and Bulgaria. Since its accession in

Figure 3: Women in the Commission by country of origin



Notes: We count women Commissioner terms (N = 53) and women Director General terms (N = 35), including double entries of persons serving in more than one Commission. Note that countries differ in the duration of EU membership. Ten new member states entered the EU in 2004 (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Malta, and Cyprus), two in 2007 (Bulgaria and Rumania), and Croatia in 2013. Consequently, they are less likely to show a high number of women terms.

Source: own compilation (as of December 2020)

2007, Bulgaria has been represented in the College of Commissioners exclusively by women: Meglena Kunewa (DG SANTE), Kristalina Georgieva (DG ECHO under Barroso II and a short stint in DG BUDG under Juncker) and Mariya Gabriel (DGs CONNECT and DIGIT under Juncker and DG EAC under von der Leyen). Similarly, all of Sweden’s Commissioners since the country entered the EU in 1995 have been female: Anita Gradin (DG JUST), Margot Wallström (DGs ENV under Prodi and COMM under Barroso I), Cecilia Malmström (DGs HOME under Barroso II and TRADE under Juncker) and Ylva Johansson (DG HOME). Along with Margot Wallström, Anita Gradin has been hailed as a strong leader. She was decisive in anchoring women’s interests in the Justice and Home Affairs portfolio by pushing trafficking in women onto the wider agenda of European policy cooperation and broadening the debate to include women’s perspectives (Kantola 2010: 83).

From the perspective of women in accession countries, Brussels might present a ‘fresh’ political setting where no male incumbents occupy positions and where top political positions seem more easily available than in the home country, where they frequently ‘struggle with gendered institutions’ (Naurin & Naurin 2018: 222).

3. Drivers and Barriers

This section turns to factors that drive the patterns. We discuss three bundles of factors that support or hinder the increase of women’s share and their role in the EU Commission. We start with factors situated at the EU level: the appointment procedure for Commissioners and the Commission personnel policy. Then we turn to the national barriers to a more balanced gender representation, highlighting the substantial differences across member states. Finally, we look at the specific interaction across the EU multilevel system.

Particularly since the Lisbon Treaty, we can observe that demand by Commission presidents and the EP is increasingly answered by more female candidates suggested by member state governments.

First, the number of women at the political top of the Commission started to grow late, stagnated around 30–35% for two decades (1995 onwards) and only recently reached (almost) parity (see Figure 1). The appointment procedure for Commissioners is crucial to understand these numbers; the more recent dynamic is, among others, the result of changes in this procedure.

In the EU system, access to the political top of the Commission is based on a formal appointment process. Every country nominates one or two potential candidates. On this basis, the Commission president decides on the allocation of portfolios and negotiates policy field responsibilities in close connection with personnel decisions. This process has changed over time, with implications for women's leadership in the Commission. Historically, Commissioners were proposed by their national governments and the list adopted by the Council. Today, the Commission president and Commissioners are still formally appointed by the Council with a qualified majority. But the Maastricht Treaty increased the European Parliament's say in the choice of Commission personnel, giving it the power to approve or reject the entire Commission. The Parliament turned this into a powerful instrument to scrutinize nominees in individual hearings on their legal and political fitness for the job. Prodi has been referred to as the first Commission president to 'understan[d] at least the rhetoric of balanced participation' (MacRae 2012: 310). He explicitly encouraged member states to put forward women's names.

Close scrutiny indicates that the effort to achieve a gender-balanced Commission originates in the EP at least as much as in the Commission itself. For example, in 1995 the EP used its new right of scrutiny and consent to announce that it would accept the Commission only if it encompassed at least 25% female members. The Commission president gained more power to

select Commissioners with the Lisbon Treaty. The *Spitzenkandidaten* process⁵ strengthened the Commission president's ties with Parliament, which had been pushing for more women in the EU institutions. Closely connected, the nomination and selection of Commissioners gained public visibility.

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In this context, designated Commission President Ursula von der Leyen publicly committed to ensuring parity in her College – a goal she showed to be serious about when requesting Dublin to put forward 'a woman and a man' rather than 'a man and a woman' as candidates after the resignation of Trade Commissioner Phil Hogan in August 2020.⁶ In sum, these changes rendered the president more assertive vis-à-vis national governments in demanding that candidates meet specific profiles or that a number of candidates be put forward rather than a single choice (Hartlapp et al. 2021 section 2).

Regarding women at the administrative top, Figure 2 reveals an even later take-off and more contained development that can be linked to recruitment and personnel policy in the Commission. Recruitment into the Commission administration is merit-based and focuses on generalist profiles. Besides qualifications, nationality is a key factor both for initial recruitment and when it comes to promotion to higher career positions. Historically, staff regulations contained a commitment to 'geographical balance'. The allocation of top administrative positions was carried out with an eye to 'fair shares' of nationalities (Kassim et al. 2013: 36) and national networks mattered for career advancement within the Commission. Over time, selection became more meritocratic and nationality less important (Kassim et al. 2013:

⁵ Prior to European elections, European political groupings nominate lead candidates for the role of Commission President. This procedure was first used in 2014.

⁶ <https://www.thejournal.ie/phil-hogan-replacement-5187561-Aug2020/>

38–39). We observe a ‘technocratisation’, where individuals are increasingly likely to have worked in the Commission administration – on average in two different DGs – before moving to top positions (Kassim et al. 2013: 46 and 59).

For almost three decades now, staff policies have explicitly aimed at improving gender balance within the Commission ranks (Connelly & Kassim 2017). These policies developed hand in hand with legislation and policy initiatives on gender equality, gender mainstreaming and anti-discrimination directed at member states. Starting in the late 1980s, a number of positive action programs and strategies were adopted. Initially, they aimed at increasing career opportunities for women in the Commission administration through training and recruitment but moved on to include awareness raising for equal opportunities and later evaluation and monitoring. In the 2000s, concrete measures were added; for example, a requirement was introduced to build recruitment juries such that female candidates would not face all-male panels, as well as systematic training of high-ranking officials in how to ensure gender mainstreaming in their management decisions. More recent measures and developments include gender equality scoreboards to compare advances across Directorates General, the strengthening of peer networks among senior female staff, and a number of holistic personnel policy programs that focus on broader matters of diversity and inclusion (Hartlapp et al. 2021 section 4).

Second, until today leadership positions in the Commission show a substantial horizontal gender divide: women at the top of the Commission tend to come from a small group of member states. While the Scandinavian and some Eastern European countries as well as France, Luxembourg and Germany are overrepresented, two-thirds of member states are underrepresented.

In this respect, barriers to a more balanced gender representation lie with the member states. One potential explanatory factor is the partisan composition of governments. We would expect leftist governments, who ideologically support

gender equality, to be more likely to nominate women (Erzeel & Celis 2016). These parties also more often and earlier on implemented internal quotas (Krook 2009) and have a higher percentage of women among their candidates and deputies (Davidson-Schmich 2014). Somewhat surprisingly, though, partisan orientation of the ruling government does not explain why some member states have much higher shares of female Commissioners.⁷ For example, of the three German female Commissioners, two were appointed by Conservative governments. In France, both female Commissioners were sent by Conservative governments. In spite of changing partisan composition of governments, Sweden always appointed women for the Commission positions.

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Rather, differences between member states related to the size and contours of the pool of female candidates matter. The prior qualifications of female Commissioners, i.e., the professional positions they held previous to their engagement in the Commission, and the supply of potential women leaders in national political systems help us to understand patterns of when and where women lead at the political top of the Commission. Both factors have gone through transformations over time that supported the increase in the number of women leading in the Commission. Before entering the top political levels of the Commission, the largest share (62%) held ministerial positions, including one as head of government. Some were members of national parliaments or acted as party leaders (21%). National political institutions are clearly arenas important to fostering women’s leadership in the Commission.

The expertise women gain in national politics could in part explain why horizontal gender divides are less pronounced in the EU’s executive than in national politics. Leadership positions in the Commission frequently mark a further step in

⁷ A multivariate regression analysis did not yield significant results for party family, gender role attitudes, and percent of women in parliament (controlled for East-West differences, Nordic countries and general time trend).

careers that are already well advanced. Women who started out in ‘softer’ portfolios have frequently moved to more powerful and prestigious positions at the national level before moving on to Brussels. This qualifies them for powerful portfolios at the supranational level as well. Take the example of Neelie Kroes: she had dealt with the privatization of public services as the Netherlands’ Minister for Transport and Communication before entering the Commission on the Competition portfolio. Or consider Margrethe Vestager, who entered Denmark’s national government as Minister for Education, a classic soft portfolio, in 1998. She moved on to become Minister for Economic Affairs and Interior in 2011, providing her with valuable experience for the Competition portfolio in the EU Commission.

Third, barriers and drivers at the national level and in the EU political system are not separate from each other. Instead, there is an interaction between changes in the appointment procedures in the EU political system and Commission personnel policy and in the pool of potential candidates at the national level. Particularly since the Lisbon Treaty, Commission presidents have signalled to member state governments that putting forward women might be rewarded with access to more prestigious and powerful portfolios.

A case in point is von der Leyen’s promise to give the powerful Internal Market portfolio to France on the condition that the country nominate a woman for the position. Consequently, France proposed Sylvie Goulard, who had a strong background in EU politics as well as different national executive functions. Yet, the EU institutions share powers in the appointment process, and Sylvie Goulard fell victim to a politically divided EP. Still, this example highlights that, while changes in appointment procedures are important to explain *when* women enter the Commission, taking into account differences in these women’s experiences in national political systems leads us to a better understanding of *where* they act in leadership positions in the Commission. Consequently, responsibilities to work towards parity in a horizontally and nationally balanced way do not lie with the EU political system or with member states only. Rather, policies that span the different levels of the EU political system seem most promising to advance female leadership in

the Commission. The next section turns to the potential benefits of such a strategy before we conclude with concrete suggestions for policies.

4. Policy Effects of Women Leading in the Commission

Research frequently differentiates between ‘descriptive’ and ‘substantive’ representation. ‘Descriptive’ representation refers to the resemblance of representatives and those they stand for in terms of characteristics such as gender, race or class. ‘Substantive’ representation means that representatives act for the people they represent by pursuing policies that favour their interests. Descriptive representation is frequently taken as proxy for substantive representation and it is argued that diversity makes political decisions better. Female politicians might share important experiences with citizens (Lowande et al. 2019) and can emphasise otherwise neglected topics, or they could offer greater legitimacy to decisions (Arnesen & Peters 2018). From this perspective, assessing policy effects of women leading in the Commission faces two challenges. First, critiques argue that women at the top do not necessarily represent the interests of the majority of women (Lloren 2015). Secondly, rather than resemblance in characteristics, it is the agency of women and, in particular, cooperative constellations that matter for policy effects (Childs & Krook 2008). To address this second criticism, we look at portfolios with *joint* women leadership across the politico-administrative branches, as here policy effects should be particularly likely. Empirically, joint political and administrative female leadership date back as early as the Prodi Commission (Anna Diamantopoulou and Odile Quintin; Margot Wallström and Catherine Day; Michaele Schreyer and Edith Kitzmantel) and became more important with rising numbers of women at the top of the Commission.

‘For the development of EU anti-discrimination policy, the gender of decision-makers clearly mattered [...]’

A prime example is Commissioner for Employment and Social Affairs, Anna Diamantopoulou, who pushed through legislation that widened the scope of existing anti-discrimination directives

from employment to social protection, including healthcare and social advantages, as well as access to public goods and services (Directives 2000/78/EC and 2004/113/EC). She used her powerful position in the organizational set-up of the Commission to advance policies against opposition from other DGs and member states that feared increased costs. When she left the Commission in 2004, her Director General, Odile Quintin, continued to push the agenda and led DG Employment and Social Affairs to propose a general framework directive for equal treatment. For the development of EU anti-discrimination policy, the gender of decision-makers clearly mattered (Hartlapp et al., 2014, 71–77). Anti-discrimination policy in a way is a most likely case to study policy effects of women in office. Yet, women’s leadership alliances across the political and administrative top matter even in policy areas that are not suspected of an essentialist notion of women’s interests. EU foreign policy is a case in point (D’Almeida et al. 2017). Here, female leadership in the EEAS seems to have affected the 2018 Strategic Approach to Women, Peace and Security to further implement UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and the shift from men/women dichotomies toward more gender-inclusive reasoning in central policy documents (Haastrup et al. 2019: 67–68). The current women leaders at the top of the EEAS are reported ‘to ensure the gender perspective’ in all the meetings in which they mutually participate and to have ‘launched several initiatives to strengthen the pipeline of women for management positions, by providing trainings and networking opportunities’ (Horst 2020).

It is problematic to claim strong causal links between gender and policy output – not least since the limited number of women at the top of the Commission make systematic comparison across policy fields or other individual characteristics like nationality or ideological affiliation of the women difficult. Nevertheless, the examples suggest that combined administrative and political leadership could be particularly relevant to study the policy effects of women leading in the Commission.

5. Outlook: Where to Go from Here

Summarizing the analysis so far, we can discern different patterns characterizing the rise of female leadership to the administrative and political

top. They highlight specific takeaways and suggest different avenues for where to go from here. Generally, our analysis points to shared responsibilities of central actors such as the European Commission, the European Parliament and national governments, as well as women’s networks, yet the weight of their individual influence on women’s nomination chances depends on whether it is a top position in politics or in the administration.

The European Commission. In the *administrative* top positions, Director Generals customarily work their way up through the organizational hierarchy. Here, the European Commission plays a central role for the advancement of female Director Generals. From the 1980s onwards, a personnel policy aimed at improving gender balance was established; for example, gender equality scoreboards compare advances across Directorates General and the strengthening of peer networks among senior female staff. Timing plays a role, as cohorts from accession countries still need time to reach the top of the career ladder.

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Besides well-known human resource tools to foster gender balance, the Commission’s personnel policy should pay particular attention to two issues: horizontal gender divides and the different likelihood of women from different national backgrounds advancing the career ladder. Regarding existing horizontal gender divides, it would be important to assure diversity in policymaking not only in ‘feminine’ portfolios, but across all policy areas. Regarding national bias in administrative top positions, we suggest identifying countries with a strong female presence, such as Bulgaria, for the countries that last acceded to the

EU, or France for the founding member states. They could serve as role models in, for example, personnel policy of the Commission or in peer networks.

EU institutions jointly. Women in the highest *political* echelons typically enter through national executives. In the early years they were almost exclusively nominated by member states that could appoint two Commissioners and decided to send a woman on the second ticket. The analyses point to the importance of interrelated efforts of the EU institutions to increase the share of women as Commissioners. When the European Parliament and the Commission president demanded more female candidates to be put forward for the political top positions from the mid-1990s onwards, this was more easily met by governments with higher numbers of nationally experienced female politicians, such as Sweden. Frequently these experienced women were able to gain access to ‘masculine’ and ‘prestigious’ portfolios. The Commission president-elect, supported by the EP via its hearings during the Spitzenkandidaten procedure should thus not cease to demand at least two candidates of different genders from each member state. This would increase the likelihood that more female candidates from different national backgrounds were chosen.

What Actors Could Do

Commission: use and expand personnel policy, with a special focus on horizontal gender divides and national backgrounds

EU institutions: join efforts by linking the demand for women candidates from member states to the EP right of scrutiny and consent in the appointment process

National governments: target societal norms and attitudes towards women in top political positions and establish a pool of experienced female politicians

Women networks: assure that equality principles are not traded off against other (partisan) interests

National governments. Neither sheer numbers, such as the share of women in the national legislative, nor the ideological composition of government alone explains why some member states have much higher shares of female Commissioners. To reach a gender-balanced supply of candidates we need to look beyond political factors and gender quotas, and target societal norms and attitudes towards women in top political positions (Norris & Inglehart 2001; Paxton et al. 2010). A change towards more progressive attitudes would, among others, involve a renunciation of sex stereotypes in media reporting of female politicians and in public discourse (Trimble 2016). National governments are justified in addressing these issues, for example, by sponsoring campaigns that elucidate women’s exclusion and aim at changing how citizens think about gender and politics (Krook & Norris 2014). They should furthermore work to establish a pool of experienced female politicians who may be sent out to fill a position in the European Commission. Countries with a history of strong female presence in EU politics, such as Sweden, but also the more powerful big member states, might be particularly prone to use their influence to directly persuade fellow member states to increase their share of female nominees. They should also support developments indirectly, by keeping the issue of gender equality visible on the EU agenda and by underlining the link between balanced representation and EU core values.

Women’s networks. In addition to Commission personnel policy, interrelated efforts among EU institutions and national governments, and women’s networks in the EU multilevel system play an important role for female leadership at the political top of the Commission. Arguably, women have used their political leadership positions to recruit women to top administrative positions as their Director Generals. A good example is Environment Commissioner Wallström; looking for a new chief for her DG in 2002, she called Catherine Day, stating that she ‘would love to have a woman Director General’.⁸ This underlines that, even more than ‘critical mass’, it is the critical agency of women that matters to the mobilization

⁸ Historical Archives of the European Union, Oral History Programme, Entretien avec Catherine Day, 9 September 2011, p. 11, <https://archives.eui.eu/en/oral-history/#ECM2>.

of organizational resources and shaping of leadership positions (Childs & Krook 2009).

At the same time, the shift towards hearings in parliament has politicized the appointment process of Commissioners. Affiliation to political groups and dynamics between majority and opposition are important factors to support or reject candidates. This can hinder the appointment of female candidates put forward by national governments. This seems to have played into the rejection of Sylvie Goulard, the first French candidate for the position of Commissioner under von der Leyen. Here we see room for women's agency. The existence of organized groups and women's networks could assure that equality principles are not traded off against other (partisan) interests when it comes to decisions about high-ranking political personnel.

Finally, we wish to highlight that female representation at the administrative as well as the political top makes a difference for policy output. The European Commission holds a quasi-monopoly to propose legislation and, as guardian of the treaties, oversees member states' implementation of EU policies. From this perspective, fostering gender balance is an important step towards EU policy that presents a broad range of citizens' interests. Currently, appointment rules assure that Director Generals and heads of cabinets come from a different country than their respective Commissioners. These rules could be broadened to consider not only nationality but also gender diversity and thereby appoint a female Director General when the Commissioner is a man, and vice versa.

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