

From Interest Group to (Almost) Equal Citizenship: Women's Representation in the Norwegian Parliament

BY BERYL NICHOLSON

In recent years representation of women in the parliaments of the Nordic countries has considerably outstripped that in most other democracies. There has also been a rapid increase in the number of women in government. In Norway 59 of the 165 representatives (36%) elected to the present parliament in 1989 were women, a proportion only exceeded in Sweden. In the Labour Party (the largest single party) more women were elected than men, 32 of the total of 63, and in the Labour minority government formed early in November 1990, nine of the 19 ministers are women.

These countries are the foremost examples of those with substantial representation of women in their legislatures which also use list systems of proportional representation. However, with the exception of Finland, prior to the second world war, the proportion of women in Nordic parliaments was no higher than in most others¹. For some forty or so years after the introduction of proportional representation, women's presence was little more than token. The questions which need to be asked, therefore, are: first, why, in the movement towards greater equality for women over the past two decades, have these systems proved less of a barrier than others to the achievement of equality in the political sphere?; second, why has women's representation increased faster under some of these systems than others? The Norwegian experience suggests where we should look for some of the answers.

In 1921 a list system of proportional representation replaced a system of two rounds of ballots in single-member constituencies, which did not produce a fair result and, as a consequence, had become discredited. The new system was supported by those who wanted to see women elected to parliament, who believed it would increase the willingness of parties to nominate women and improve women's chances of election. Under the previous system, a very few women had deputised for representatives in parliament, but none had been elected in her own right. The introduction of proportional representation was followed by a doubling of the number of women candidates and the election of the first woman to the *Storting*, the Norwegian parliament, Karen Platou, but it by no means opened the way to equitable representation of women, and until the second world war only six women were elected.

The most returned at a single election was three (of a total of 150), in 1933.

At the first post-war election in 1945 seven women were elected, but there was no further increase until 1957 in spite of a steady rise in the number of women candidates. The post-war period also saw the entry of women into the cabinet (whose members may come from outside as well as inside parliament), but here too it was only a token presence. Every government from then on had just one woman minister, until a non-socialist coalition government formed after the election of 1965 included two. The number of women elected as *vararepresentanter*, alternates or substitute members, also increased, and consistently exceeded the number elected as representatives. Alternates replace representatives appointed as government ministers, any who are temporarily absent due to illness or commitments elsewhere, or who leave parliament for any reason between elections. Though the majority of alternates are never called upon, thanks to this institution the number of women who participate in the business of parliament at some time is greater than the number elected as representatives (though, for the same reason, so too is the number of men).

The country is divided into 19 multi-member constituencies with from four to 15 representatives, each comprising one county. Most women were elected in counties² with most seats, and for parties which returned the largest number of representatives per county. It was thus predominantly the larger parties, the Labour Party and the Conservatives (*Høyre*), which had women among their representatives. In the Labour Party the practice of putting the nominees of interest groups (women and youth) in a sufficiently high position on the party's list to be elected (the equivalent of a safe seat) resulted in what was, in effect, a token quota system. There thus evolved a tradition of having one woman, though usually only one, among the representatives from some counties, and the position was handed down from one woman to the next³. Only very rarely did a party have a woman as its sole representative in any one county, and most women had between two and five male colleagues. With the exception of the Labour Party in Oslo, no party elected more than one woman from a single county at any election before 1977.

The movement to increase women's representation dates from the mid-1960s, when there were still only 12 women representatives in parliament (9%). However, the number elected in Sweden, the country against which Norway most often measured its own performance, was already beginning to rise. There were also stirrings in some of the political parties, three of which produced reports on the position of women in society. Women were able to point to the discrepancy between their underrepresentation and the prevailing conception of representative democracy, which holds that elected assemblies should reflect the composition of the electorate.

Women organised their first campaign to increase their representation in the run-up to the local government elections in 1967. Women's representation on local councils was still lower than in parliament, and indeed remains so. An important reason for initiating a campaign then, rather than in a parliamentary election, was the nature of the electoral system. As in parliamentary elections, a list system is used in local elections, but the voters may cross out names or give additional votes up to a maximum which varies with the size of the council. The combined effect of all the alterations determines which candidates are elected. In parliamentary elections, while it is permitted to amend the list, there is no known case where sufficient lists have been altered to affect the outcome. It is well known that temperance and other organisations, and voters in a particular locality within a commune, use this possibility to ensure the election of their preferred candidates. Therefore the campaign urged voters to support women candidates.

The proportion of women councillors elected in 1967 increased from 6.7% to 9.5%. At the following local elections in 1971, when there was a further, smaller-scale, campaign, the proportion increased again, to 14.8%. Moreover, on three councils, including Oslo and Trondheim, women were in a majority, and they had 40% or more of the seats on six more⁴. These successes were popularly ascribed to coordinated campaigns to alter lists. Subsequent analysis has shown, however, that alterations played only a small part in women's success. The most important single factor in the outcome of the 1971 local elections was the increase in the number of women who were nominated as candidates.

The belief that the dramatic gains in the local elections of 1967 and 1971 were due to the support given by voters to women candidates did, however, create an impression that women were electable. By 1973 this appeared to be influencing nominations in parliamentary elections, for the number of women candidates and women elected increased dramatically. By this time, too, more women had gained experience in local government, which increased their chances of nomination as parliamentary candidates⁵. Since then there has been, as Table 1 shows, a steady, if uneven, increase in the number of women in parliament.

The proportion of women candidates has also continued to rise, and remains higher than the proportion elected, but the gap has gradually been reduced. It is here, in the evolution of nomination practice, that the part played by the electoral system can be traced. To contest a parliamentary election in any county (i.e. constituency), a party (or other group) must put forward a list containing as many names as the number of seats available and a maximum of six more⁶. The list tells voters not only who the party's candidates are but also who supports it. New lists are compiled in every county for each election. This means that all members of parliament are subject to a reselection procedure. Party nomination meetings are attended by elected delegates from all

Table 1. Women candidates, alternates and representatives, 1945-1989

	Candidates		Alternates		Representatives	
1945	200	13.2%	33	13.8%	7	4.7%
1949	279	16.4%	43	18.7%	7	4.7%
1953	282	18.5%	67	22.9%	7	4.7%
1957	287	18.0%	68	23.1%	10	6.7%
1961	282	17.9%	69	23.6%	13	8.7%
1965	310	17.8%	74	24.4%	12	8.0%
1969	354	19.7%	81	27.2%	14	9.3%
1973	935	31.6%	96	29.4%	24	15.5%
1977	1024	32.3%	112	38.5%	37	23.9%
1981	1155	37.5%	119	40.3%	40	25.8%
1985	1248	40.0%	139	47.3%	54	34.4%
1989	2876	42.0%	143	40.1%	59	35.8%

(The number of representatives was increased from 150 to 155 in 1973, to 157 in 1985 and to 165 in 1989.)

the local party branches in the county. Candidates are, with only the rarest exceptions, local people. A balance is sought between different districts, and occupational and interest groups, of which women were till recently considered just one⁷.

It is relatively rare in Norwegian elections for more than one seat to be lost or more than one additional seat to be won by a party in a single county (and virtually unknown for more than two to be lost). This means that if a party already holds two or more seats, all but one are regarded as secure. Similarly (except in elections following an increase in the number of seats, as in 1989), only the next candidate on the list is likely to have a chance of gaining an extra seat. The remainder, whose function is to attract voters but who have no chance of being elected as representatives (though those in the upper places will become alternates), are referred to as decoration. They have a supportive and representative function, though it is also a way of making one's mark, a step towards obtaining a place higher on the list at a subsequent election. It might be argued that even this allows women to be more visible than in most other electoral systems, but it is a visibility which identifies them as supporters rather than the main political actors.

The four categories of list position thus correspond to safe seats, marginal seats (at risk and first challenger) and unwinnable seats in a system with single-member constituencies. The difference, and it is an important one, is that the distribution of candidates between categories of list places is made collectively *within* each constituency. It is not simply the aggregate result of many separate decisions independently arrived at, a result which may differ from that which any of the participants wanted, as is sometimes the outcome of voters' alterations in local elections. Table 2 shows the proportion of women among candidates nominated to positions of all types from 1957 onwards. Until the early 1970s most women were found in decorative positions. A very few were nominated to secure positions: these were the token women. In seats which could potentially be lost, the 'at risk' positions

Table 2. Women candidates by list position, 1957-1989 (% of all candidates).

	Secure	At risk	Challenge	Decoration		Elected
				First	Other	
1957	9%	3%	14%	16%	20%	6.7%
1961	11%	4%	12%	16%	20%	8.7%
1965	13%	3%	10%	19%	19%	8.0%
1969	14%	6%	12%	25%	21%	9.3%
1973	19%	10%	20%	34%	33%	15.5%
1977	26%	21%	22%	36%	33%	23.9%
1981	29%	26%	26%	47%	38%	25.8%
1985	35%	34%	36%	49%	40%	34.4%
1989	42%	40%	33%	45%	42%	35.8%

on the list, the parties were inclined to play safe and field a man, though in seats which a party could stand to gain, the 'challenge' position, they have generally been more prepared to have women as candidates. These latter, even if unsuccessful, were assured positions as alternates for those who were elected, as were defeated candidates. Invariably, a higher proportion of alternates than both representatives and candidates were women. That is, they fulfilled a familiar women's role, they had to step in and take over when men were not available but got little recognition for what they did.

By 1989 almost as many women were found in electable as in decorative positions. Women are becoming *candidates*, and not just *women* candidates. The greater electability of women has also increased their role as supporters in the decorative positions, a further indication that they are considered as half the population, not merely a group. Nonetheless, there remains a residual lack of confidence, or willingness, to field women candidates on the same terms as men.

Perhaps the most accurate barometer of the extent to which women's and men's chances of entering parliament have been equalised is their relative position at the point of recruitment. Whereas the total number of women elected in any one year will continue to reflect in part the position of women at previous elections, their share of new recruits gives a more accurate indication of progress towards equality. It is clear from Table 3 that there is still some way to go before women are treated as equals with men.

Differences in party positions on women's representation have had

Table 3. Representative leaving and entering parliament at each election, 1965-1989.

	Leaving			Entering			Total elected
	Total	Women		Total	Women		
1965	53	4	7.5%	51	3	5.8%	150
1969	67	6	8.9%	65	8	12.3%	150
1973	57	6	10.5%	60	15	25.0%	155
1977	62	8	12.9%	62	21	33.9%	155
1981	53	13	24.5%	50	16	32.0%	155
1985	55	11	20.0%	54	25	46.3%	157
1989	63	15	23.8%	68	20	29.4%	165

(Discrepancies between the numbers leaving (not seeking re-election and not re-elected) and entering are due to re-election of representatives who had served in earlier parliaments. Only one of these (in 1973) was a woman.)

surprisingly little influence on the willingness of parties to be represented by women in the past. During the 1980s, however, there has developed a growing divergence along ideological lines. It is most clearly seen in the increased proportion of women among the Labour Party representatives and stagnation in the Conservative Party. There has also been an increase in the electoral strength of the Socialist Left, a party committed to equality, which is reflected in the composition of its representatives, and in the Progress Party, which does not specifically encourage women's participation and whose representatives have, with just one exception, all been men. The centrist parties, as might be expected, are found in an intermediate position and have seen a gradual increase in the number of women among their representatives.

These differences have emerged as the parties with an ideological commitment to equality have moved from positions of principle to concrete action through the adoption of gender quotas. The Liberal Party introduced quotas first, in 1974, followed by the Socialist Left a year later. The Labour Party adopted them in 1983 and they became effective in the nomination process for the 1985 parliamentary election.

Gender quotas apply equally to men and women. In all three parties the aim is to ensure that *representatives*, not merely candidates, include a minimum of 40% from either sex. The immediate effect has been to force local parties to seek out suitable women candidates, which they have done without difficulty. This prevents the nomination of disproportionate numbers of men to electable positions by default, because potential women candidates have been overlooked. Institutionalised equality has begun to replace institutionalised discrimination.

There are no hard and fast rules laid down by the parties about how quotas are to be put into practice. It is left to the local or county parties responsible for selecting candidates to decide how they shall be implemented. Selection is entirely a matter for local party members. The national headquarters of the parties have neither access to the meeting nor any right to veto the slate, and the decisions of the constituency parties are final. In virtually all parties, if the leadership sought to dispute a selection it would cause major internal party damage. A common solution is to alternate, if only approximately, women and men candidates on the lists. In a large party this practice is likely to be sufficient to ensure an equitable outcome, but in smaller parties, which may only win a single seat in a county, it could still result in all-male representation if a man were put in top place on all the party's lists. Some coordination between counties is therefore necessary, but it is implemented by common agreement, not imposed from above. In the Socialist Left party, for example, all the nomination proposals are considered together by the National Council (a democratically elected body of county representatives), which recommends modifications to the counties concerned if it appears that quotas for the elected representatives will not be achieved. Thus, in 1989, when the party's 11 gains

Table 4. Representatives elected in 1989 by party, county, sex and list position.

F	M	Soc.L.	Lab.	Chr.	Cent.	Cons.	Prog.	Other	
7	9	MF	FMFMF	F	-	MFMMF	MMM		
6	10	F	MFMF	MF	M	MMFM	MMF		
6	9	FM	MFMF	-	F	MFMF	MM		
5	7	MF	MFMF	M	M	MF	M		
3	9	M	MFM	MF	M	MFM	MM		
3	7	F	MFF	MM	M	MM	M		
5	5	M	FMFF	M	F	MF	M		
3	6	F	MMF	M	M	MF	M		
3	5	M	MFMF	-	F	M	-		
2	5	-	MFMF	-	-	MM	M		
3	4	F	MFM	-	-	MF	M		
2	5	-	MFMF	-	M	M	M		
3	3	M	FF	F	-	M	M		
2	4	M	FMM	-	M	F	-		
1	5	M	MFM	-	-	M	M		
1	4	-	MF	M	-	M	M		
1	4	-	MF	M	M	M	-		
2	2	-	F	F	-	M	M		
1	3	M	FM	-	-	-	-	M	
Total									
F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
59	106	7	10	32	31	5	9	3	8
						11	26	1	21
								-	1

were made in as many counties, seven of the 17 representatives elected were women.

During the 1970s the introduction of quotas by the Liberals and the Socialist Left did not materially influence the composition of parliament as a whole. Both parties are small. The Liberal party elected no women after 1965 and had already all but disappeared from parliament after a split in 1972. More surprisingly, the improvement in women's position in parliament which occurred between 1981 and 1989, after the much larger Labour Party introduced quotas, was no greater than that between 1973 and 1981. The explanation is to be found in the stabilisation, at some elections decline, in women's representation in the second largest party, the Conservatives, since the mid-1970s. Though it continues to return more women representatives than the small parties, the decline in its parliamentary strength, together with the parliamentary advance of the far right, has largely offset the effect of an acceleration in the improvement of women's position in the Labour Party and the increased strength of the Socialist Left.

The polarisation which has occurred is evident from the results of the 1989 election. In Table 4 representatives elected for each party and county are shown according to their position on their party's list (from left to right). This evidence runs counter to previous experience, which suggested that an increase in the number of women elected for some parties puts pressure on the rest to do likewise. At most, it may go some way towards explaining the cautious increase in the number of women candidates and representatives in the small centrist parties, which largely restrict themselves to recommending to local branches that they nomi-

nate women. The influence on the far right has been negligible, if not negative. The sole woman elected for the Progress Party had been nominated in the first decorative position, that is the list position below the candidate considered to have a chance of winning a seat.

It has been important to the smooth implementation of quotas that it has not been necessary to force existing representatives, that is men, to forego re-election. This is due less to the mechanics of the electoral system than to the frequency with which electable list positions are vacated. A third, sometimes more, of the representatives leave parliament at each election, the vast majority because they do not seek re-election. At the 1989 election 63 representatives left parliament, even though only 22 seats changed hands. Only two of the latter resulted in the loss of sitting representatives. On most lists one or more places are available for reallocation at each election. Thus even new candidates, men as well as women, may be nominated to secure list positions, and this makes it less difficult to increase women's representation than in countries where the turnover of representatives is slower.

It is clear from the relative absence of women from legislatures in Norway (and elsewhere) before the 1970s that there is no necessary connection between list systems of proportional representation per se and a high proportion of women representatives. Women are certainly not *favoured* by this system. It has sustained a practice of electing only token women, and has at times failed to prevent a total absence of women from parliament (as in 1924). Nor does it of itself ensure that increased women's representation, once achieved, will be maintained; in the local elections in 1991 there was, a decline in the number of women elected.

The most important characteristic of this system is its responsiveness to political opinion, and consequently to change. Not only is it fair, but the voters insist that it is seen to be fair.⁸ The position of women in society as a whole is therefore more accurately reflected in parliament than under other electoral systems. In times of transition, the system accommodates change by allowing it to be made gradually. Parties are not forced to reject men candidates outright if they select women, still less to unseat men in order to elect women, even when implementing gender quotas. This characteristic of the electoral system, along with the rate of turnover, has been of much greater importance than the quotas themselves in improving women's chances of election.

Within this system, the open, democratic and accountable process of nomination for parliamentary elections has ensured fairer treatment of women than allowing voters to alter lists and thereby influence the choice of representatives. In practice, it is a minority of powerful, self-confident, organised voters and those already active in politics who most exploit the latter. It does little to benefit women or other underrepresented sections of the electorate, such as ethnic minorities⁹. Local autonomy within the parties and local recruitment of candidates

have also been important, because they enable women at the grass-roots to influence selection and enhance their chances of becoming candidates.

On the basis of the Norwegian evidence, one must conclude that the most fundamental influence on the representation of women is the prevailing conception of democracy and representation, how it relates to the position of women in society and how that relationship evolves over time. However, though the mechanics of the electoral system cannot of themselves effect change, they are an essential framework within which the democratic process is played out. Norway has an electoral system which does not impose structural discrimination over and above the continuing bias against women in society, and this has been decisive in increasing women's representation.

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- 1 S. McRae, 'Women at the top: the case of British national politics', *Parliamentary Affairs* vol. 43, No.3, 1990; B. Nicholson, *Increasing Women's Parliamentary Representation: the Norwegian Experience* (Papers/Skrifter 2. Centre for Scandinavian Studies, 1989), see this also for other points in the present article. Equality between men and women in Scandinavian societies was also much less than commonly believed, cf T. Skard, and E. Haavio-Mannila, 'Equality between the Sexes- Myth or Reality in Norden', *Diedalus*, vol. 113, No.1, Winter 1984, pp.141-167, p. 148.
- 2 In 1989 eight seats for additional members (termed 'seats at large') were introduced to equalise the overall national distribution of seats between parties by allocating the extra ones in the counties with most unused votes.
- 3 H. Valen, 'Factional Activities and Nominations in Political Parties', *Acta Sociologia*, vol. 3, No.4, 1958.
- 4 I. N. Means, 'Women in Local Politics: the Norwegian Experience', *Canadian Journal of Political Science* vol. 5, No.3, 1972.
- 5 H. Valen & D. Katz, *Political Parties in Norway: Community Study* (Universitetsforlaget, 1964). There is a parallel with the acquisition of political experience by low status men as a means of their earlier entry into politics, see K. A. Eliassen and M. N. Pedersen, 'Professionalization of Legislatures: Long Term change in Political Recruitment', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 20, No.2, 1978.
- 6 Candidates are listed with their commune of residence (in Oslo their address) and usually their occupation, as well as their name. There is no ballot paper as such. Voting is done by selecting one list from those laid out in the polling booth and putting it in a special envelope, which is then sealed and put in the ballot box. '
- 7 H. Valen, 'The recruitment of Nominees in Norway', *Scandinavian Political Studies* vol. 1, 1966; cf T. Hjellum, 'The Politicization of Local Government in Norway', *Scandinavian Political Studies*, vol. 2, 1967.
- 8 S. Rokkan and T. Hjellum, 'The Storting Election of September 1965', *Scandinavian Political Studies* vol. 1, 1966.
- 9 J. Rath, 'Political Participation of Ethnic Minorities in the Netherlands', *International Migration Review* vol. 17, No. 3.