

Institute
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and Democracy Questions 

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May 2011

Political Parties and Women

1. Political parties are recognised as the “gatekeepers” to positions in politics and exercise a patronage function.

To a large degree they decide on candidates or party lists for elections and thereafter government positions. Women are underrepresented at all levels of political life and especially for the “top” jobs such as Finance Ministries, Security Ministries and of course heads of government. Cabinet posts concentrating on family and women’s affairs merely reinforce the stereotyping of women in society as a whole. In some countries such as Spain there is a conscious effort to distribute posts on an equal basis and in time there will be more acceptance of women in ministerial position if this is pursued in future and in more countries.

2. The candidate selection process is important to gain representation but often women do not come forward and shy away from taking part in politics. Clearly candidate selection has to be on the basis of merit and not just colour, race or gender but what does this mean? A British think tank has recently called on political parties to define this more precisely so that rejection on a party list can be clearly understood and candidates who are unsuccessful can improve their chances. Therefore parties should post on their web pages what they expect from their candidates and also how they understand the job of a “good” parliamentarian. Politics unlike other jobs does not have a specific job description and qualifications are often vague. To improve the professionalism of the job, there should be a concerted effort to define more precisely this aspect. Women candidates could then receive specific training geared to meeting these requirements. Training however should not stop with selection since if women are not “successful” once elected this had a negative knock-on effect. Assistance should be given to ensure that once in the world of politics they feel able to cope.

Another problem parties might face is that not enough candidates come forward and this can be related to the perceived adversarial nature of politics which can alienate many women. Politicians themselves can help by trying to conduct their work on a more constructive way than many currently see it.

3. Some think tanks have suggested that parties should post on their websites information on their position on women in politics, mechanisms in place to improve this and any progress achieved at regular intervals eg every six months. Failure to meet their own stated goals should be explained.

4. Not only should parties strive to increase female representation in parliament but also aim to give women important jobs once they are there eg as committee chairmen and again on committees dealing with vital issues in the economy, finance, home affairs and so on. There is also the question of how cross-party networks in parliament can help eg in Finland where this has been practiced. Has the experience there been positive and could this be

adopted elsewhere? An interchange of practice on the parliamentary level between participating states for best practices could help women in parliaments.

5. Quotas or all-women short lists are well-known ways to improve the numbers of women in politics and in time make themselves redundant. However they need to be kept in place over a period of several elections. Removal as the experience of the devolved assemblies and parliament in the UK shows can lead to a decline or stagnation of female representation albeit on a high level.

6. Whereas we often focus on quotas in parties for elections, women in parliament and so on it should be remembered that parties themselves can set an example in their own structures and assigning important positions to women. In some countries eg Belgium studies have shown that although female representation in parliament is relatively high, it has not been matched by representation in the parties themselves. Here there could be more collection of data to see if there is a trickle down effect in countries with high female representation in parliament.

7. Obviously the media has a big role to play when it comes to women in politics. For example studies have pointed out that not only in the UK at the last election were all the leading candidates in the TV debates male but the interviewers also. Furthermore the panels drawing up the questions for the debate included a handful of women. An effort should at least be made to include female interviewers in such a situation.

8. To collate and facilitate the exchange of data and experiences in the OSCE area it would be useful if parliaments set up a committee report on the lines of the Speakers Conference in the UK on Parliamentary Representation 2008/9 looking at representation and underrepresentation. These findings should be debated within the forum of the OSCE.

Political Parties and OSCE Commitments

1. Political parties are the critical hub of a democracy. Where the democratic culture is weak, parties are also very often fragile. Within the OSCE there is a wide range of historical development with regard to party systems and in many cases the word “party” has negative connotations evoking memories of an authoritarian past. In western European democracies the party system often has roots going back to the nineteenth century and “families” of political groups have developed over time. In new democracies parties do not have these roots and are often dominated by personalities with weak party structures and frail links with constituents.
2. One of the main jobs of political parties is to assist in the election process and compete with each other. Often this involves of necessity confrontation even within coalition partners as the recent referendum on election system in the UK showed. However a sign of a mature democracy is the post-election phase and the acceptance by the losing side of the decision. This can only be possible if there is an understanding that the process was free and fair and the work of the OSCE in monitoring this is essential to fostering this climate of trust. In addition however the parties themselves have to learn not only how to win elections, but how to lose. Like governing, opposition is an art. There should be a kind of “opposition culture” or an effort to engage in a constructive dialogue to control and challenge government policy. However this is not always the case and opposition parties sink to dysfunctional and obstructive tactics undermining the trust in the profession of politics. Parties will only work in a constructive way in opposition if they feel that there are ways to influence government policy and a real chance to win in elections next time round. For all this to work there has to be a minimum consensus on constitutional norms and the rules of game. One way is to ensure that opposition parties are integrated eg in parliamentary work with committee chairmanships on committees concerned with public accounts. The problem of a strong executive versus legislative is common to many countries and the OSCE could review the state of play in the participating states on this.
3. Helpful also to create more trust would be a kind of fairness pact by parties during campaigning. Less negative campaigning, so-called “dirty tricks” and combative politics (also cited as one reason for fewer women candidates) would raise the level. Clearly in some political cultures there is a higher acceptance of such campaigning than in others but there have to be limits. In the UK section 106 of the Representation of the People’s Act makes it illegal for candidates to deliberately make false statements in an election campaign on their opponents with a view to influencing the outcome of the result. Last year an election court investigated such a case and deprived the member of parliament of his seat. This rarely happens but such stiff penalties could raise the level of democracy and enhance the fairness of elections.
4. Parties have a vital role in mobilising the electorate and engaging their interest in politics but very often are the reason why people switch off from politics. One reason is that voters feel it makes no difference whom they vote for and things stay the same and that politicians break their promises. A fairness pact would also lay down guidelines obliging parties to think what they promise in their election manifestos. Many points could simply be unrealistic. After all governments are not all-powerful and are constrained by membership eg in the EU or the globalised economy. Small countries too cannot take an ambitious stance on many policies. They cannot give hard

5. A code of conduct consisting of best practices from participating states could also help raise confidence in the party system. In cases of proved corruption resignation or expulsion should follow as a matter of course. For this party statutes should be transparent and clear outlining not only rights of party membership but also duties.
6. The inter-linkage between party and state in countries is a difficult one. Clearly there should be a separation from party membership and any kind of “referee” function. For example in the House of Commons the Speaker resigns party membership. But the problem goes a lot deeper in some new democracies and there is undue influence of government officials on government employees particular at election times. Whilst the OSCE can investigate such cases, there are difficulties in implementation. Employees are dependent for their jobs on such officials and where there is a climate of fear it will be a challenge to investigate such cases. Those giving evidence to an investigation are then left to face the music so to speak when the OSCE leaves.