

EDITORIAL

Women and Politics

*Luana Russo & Min Reuchamps**

Years of research has shown that women's participation in politics is essential for the quality of our democracies. For example, it facilitates women's direct engagement in public decision-making and ensures better accountability to women, and it helps advance gender equality and affects the range of policy issues that get addressed, as women tend to prioritise health, education and other key development indicators. In other words, women's leadership is crucial for building strong, sustainable democracies.

Still, women continue to be underrepresented in politics. Women's global representation is still well below the 30% benchmark often identified as the necessary level of representation. When turning our attention to Europe, we can notice that women's participation in politics across countries varies significantly, going from the nearly 47% of Iceland, and the 45% to 46% of the Nordic countries, to the 14.1% of Hungary.¹ When zooming in on the Low Countries, we continue to observe great variation, with Belgium on the lower side, with women holding 31.3% of seats in the Belgian Chamber of Representatives, which is slightly lower than the European average. After the last parliamentary election in Luxembourg in 2023, of the 60 available seats for the Chamber of Deputies, only 20 were won by women (about 33%). The Netherlands has a higher percentage of women in politics, with 40% of seats in the House of Representatives held by women after the 2023 elections (61 out of the 150 available for the *Tweede Kamer*).

One figure remains consistent across these varying percentages: despite an often-encouraging trend, women continue to be a minority. This special issue engages with this problem, and by that, delving into the topic of women's involvement in politics within the Low Countries and beyond.

As academic journal, we are committed to diversity and inclusion, and this special issue is a way to contribute to advancing knowledge by exploring the multifaceted dimensions of women's participation in politics, from the active and passive electorates to leadership roles, social movements and symbolic representation, hence fostering equitable representation.

The first article – 'Hard Worker versus Pretty Eyes' – scrutinises the media's role in shaping perceptions of Flemish ministers. Elise Storme conducts a comprehensive analysis, covering different periods of the political cycle. Contrary to expectations, they find an overrepresentation of female ministers in media

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coverage. However, a nuanced examination reveals that gender bias persists in specific aspects, such as a heightened focus on physical appearance during election periods. This article urges readers to reflect on the subtle biases embedded in media narratives, reinforcing the importance of unbiased reporting in fostering gender equality.

The second article – ‘Understanding the Religiosity-Political Participation Linkage among Muslim Women: Culturalism or Social Capital?’ – takes a deep dive into the complex relationship between religiosity and political engagement among Muslim women in Western European countries. By challenging culturalist arguments, Niels Spierings and Nella Geurts propose a nuanced understanding that considers religiosity as both a cultural and social capital factor. The findings highlight the multifaceted nature of this linkage, emphasising the need for a holistic approach in understanding Muslim women’s political participation. This article encourages scholars to move beyond simplistic assumptions and explore the intricate interplay of cultural and social factors.

The third article – ‘Ambitious Women: Hidden within the Party?’ – confronts the stereotype that political parties struggle to recruit ambitious women. Drawing on survey data from Dutch party members, Rozemarijn Esmee van Dijk challenges the assumption that women express less political ambition than men do. The results reveal a substantively small gender gap in political ambition, emphasising that ambitious women are indeed present within political parties. The article sheds light on the role of internal political efficacy in mediating the gender gap in political ambition, challenging preconceived notions and advocating for a more inclusive political landscape.

Finally, The Research Note ‘Pre-Electoral Trends and Electoral Outcomes: A Polindex Survey Analysis of Luxembourg’s 2023 Elections’ by Agnes Darabos, Nadim Farhat and Philippe Poirier helps us better understand the dynamics at play in less studied parts of the Low Countries and offer a first glimpse at findings from the first wave of the Political Observatory (Polindex) conducted in spring 2023.

As we navigate through the pages of this special issue, it becomes evident that the exploration of women’s roles in politics is a dynamic and evolving conversation. The articles presented here not only contribute valuable insights but also ignite a call for continued dialogue and research on gender representation in political spheres. *Politics of the Low Countries* remains committed to providing a platform for diverse voices, fostering a robust academic discourse that transcends gender biases and encourages a more inclusive political landscape. This special issue aims to participate in the collective effort required to gain a better understanding of how to foster women’s participation in politics. Through rigorous research and thoughtful analysis, these articles advance our knowledge, urging scholars, policymakers and the public to actively engage in reshaping the narrative of women in politics within the Low Countries and beyond.

The closing piece of this third issue of 2023 is a State of the Profession note in which we reflect on the submission we received in *Politics of the Low Countries* in the last three years. By looking at the submission by gender, we show what are the imbalances and how we strive to address them. As editors of the *Politics of the Low Countries*, along with the whole editorial team, we have proactively tried to promote

inclusivity and diversity. As we pass the torch to a new team of co-editors-in-chief, we are sure that not only will these goals be shared but that they will be carried out even more proactively.

Note

- 1 Source: Statista, available at <https://www.statista.com/chart/28223/share-of-women-in-european-politics/>.