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Abstract

Nowadays, we can distinguish gender quotas targeting the political, the social and the economic spheres of society. Taking the Belgian case as an example, this article examines to what extent these different generations or groups of gender quotas differ intrinsically from each other. To this end, it analyses five generic gender quota laws adopted in the period 1990–2011 and the rationales underlying them. The analysis shows that the rules and underlying rationales do not differ fundamentally across the different spheres of society and that existing differences can mainly be explained by a factor of time.

Keywords

Belgium, gender quotas, gender quotas for advisory boards, gender quotas for business, gender quotas for politics

Introduction

Over the last decades, norms, rules and processes of regulation have appeared with the goal of fostering gender equality. They take many forms, of which gender quotas are a very widespread and frequently used version. In this context, Holli (2011b) speaks of different generations of gender quotas. The first generation of gender quotas are for legislative elections. Indeed, gender quotas became mainly known since the 1990s as a means to promote women's political representation (Dahlerup, 2006; Krook, 2009). Today, about 100 countries worldwide have some gender quota regulating the number of men and women candidates for parliamentary elections (Dahlerup, 2012). A second generation of gender quotas are for advisory boards or committees. There is much less literature on these quotas, and that which there is refers mainly to the Finnish case (Holli, 2011a, 2011b; Holli et al., 2006), but there are some additional countries around the world with this type of gender quota. The third and so far last generation of gender quotas are for company boards, intended to improve the gender ratio in boards of listed and state-owned companies. Today, 13

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Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries have adopted gender quotas applying to corporate management boards (Armstrong and Walby, 2012).

This article compares these different generations of gender quotas, but replaces 'generations' with the term 'groups' since the sequence Holli (2011b) puts forward is not necessarily the same in all countries. However, is it relevant to distinguish between different groups of gender quotas depending on the sphere they target (political, social, economic)? The underlying question is whether gender quotas targeting different spheres intrinsically differ from each other or whether the difference mainly resides in the sequence of adoption. To answer this question, this article studies the gender quota laws that have been adopted in Belgium targeting federal advisory boards, electoral lists of candidates and boards of listed and state-owned companies, focusing on the rules adopted and the underlying rationales. The article first examines the literature on the different groups of gender quotas. The second section presents data and methodology. In the third section, the different gender quota measures are detailed, and in the fourth, the parliamentary debates on their adoption are analysed. The article concludes with a discussion of similarities and differences among groups of gender quotas and what can be learned from this comparison.

Literature on groups of gender quotas

Most of the literature so far has targeted the political sphere. Initial studies mainly focused on how gender quotas made their way onto the political agenda and how they were adopted (Lovenduski, 2005). Subsequently, the literature dealt with the effects of gender quotas, in terms of the extent to which they increase the number of women politicians, and the factors having positive or negative influences on that effect. The emphasis was very much on the features of the electoral system to which the gender quotas were added (see, for instance, Araújo and Garcia, 2006; Htun and Jones, 2002; Jones, 2004, 2009; Kittilson, 2006; Matland, 2006; Meier, 2004; Schmidt and Saunders, 2004; Schwindt-Bayer, 2009; Sliwa et al., 2011; Tremblay, 2012; Tripp and Kang, 2008). Other studies have focused on the substantive representation of women, analysing whether quotas make a difference when it comes to representing women's needs and interests. They study whether women are expected to, feel obliged to, try to escape from or, indeed, tend to represent women's needs and interests, and to what extent 'quota' women are treated differently from other women representatives (Childs and Krook, 2012; Franceschet and Piscopo, 2008; Larson, 2012; Longman, 2006; Miguel, 2012; Zetterberg, 2008). Next to such empirical investigations, there is a huge body of literature making a normative theoretical argument for gender quotas (for a good overview of the arguments, see Bacchi, 2006; Phillips, 1995).

When it comes to the two other groups of gender quotas, there is less literature, partly due to the fact that these gender quotas are more recent. In corporate management, the question of whether and under what conditions gender quotas raise the number of women is less addressed (but see Casey et al., 2010; Teigen, 2012a, 2012b); instead, there has been a focus on the resistance to such measures (Storvik and Teigen, 2010; Teigen, 2012a). There is also less literature developing a normative theoretical argument for such gender quotas, although Brammer, Millington and Pavelin (2007) distinguish ethical from economic arguments. The latter refer to the 'business case', the idea that more diversity leads to better corporate governance and ultimately performance. Research analyses how gender quotas affect decision-making processes within boards, board outcomes and financial performance, and firm innovation. Again, this research reports mixed results. While companies with the most women at the top level perform better (Desvaux et al., 2007), Ahern and Dittmar (2011) conclude that the Norwegian gender quota law led to younger and less experienced boards, with negative results, while Dale-Olsen, Schone and Verner (2012) conclude that the introduction of gender quotas did not have any negative or positive effects.

Gender quotas for advisory boards have mainly been studied in Finland. Holli (2011a) found that Finnish policy preparatory bodies, to which the 1995 Gender Quota Statute applies, have lost in status and significance as a consequence of the application of the gender quota. The only bodies not losing status and significance are the parliamentary standing committees, which are exempt from the gender quota rules (see also Holli, 2011b; Holli et al., 2006).

Literature taking a comparative approach to gender quotas mainly focuses on those targeting the political sphere. This work analyses the different legal or formal grounds of such measures (Krook, 2009), how these measures address different dimensions of representation (Franceschet et al., 2012), and how gender quotas operate in different citizenship regimes (Dahlerup, 2006) or in different electoral systems (Tremblay, 2012). The literature has generally not compared different groups of gender quotas; hence the focus of this article. This comparative approach places gender quotas for politics in a broader perspective.

Comparing groups of gender quotas

Belgium is one of the few countries imposing gender quotas in the political, economic and social spheres. This allows for a comparative analysis of gender quotas across different sectors, with key background variables, such as the landscape of political actors, citizenship or gender regime, to be held constant. Five generic laws fit in one of the three groups: the 1990 law adopting gender quotas for federal advisory boards (referred to in this article as AB.1990), and its successor in 1997 (AB.1997); the 1994 law adopting gender quotas for electoral lists of candidates (EL.1994), and the 2002 successor law (EL.2002); and the 2011 law adopting gender quotas for boards of listed and state-owned companies (B.2011).

The question is whether gender quotas targeting different spheres intrinsically differ from each other or whether the difference mainly resides in the sequence of adoption. There is an argument for both. It is plausible that different spheres of society handle different norms. Electoral politics is not business. While an equal number of men and women representing the population is a plausible argument for politics, since the population is to be represented, the argument of the business case is a plea for diverse expertise, not for proportionality. However, one could also argue that men and women should share power, in which case, proportionality would also be justified for the economic sphere. But if one argues that politics is an issue of deliberation, proportionality is not required. All this means that the percentages set for gender quotas can differ or not across the different spheres of society, and that the same goes for their naming and for the arguments put forward in the debates. Similarly, the gender quotas can differ or not in other respects, such as the sanctions and supplementary rules imposed. It is again plausible that different rules are applied in different spheres of society. The conceptualisation of the function or different practices in the various sectors may involve the use of sanctions or not, or the use of different types of sanctions. Also, politicians may be stricter for themselves than for other sectors, but the opposite may be true as well. Hence, next to the percentage set for gender quotas, their naming, the arguments put forward in the debates, the sanctions in case of non-compliance and other supplementary rules may vary, or not.

There are thus two possible hypotheses. The first runs that gender quotas targeting different spheres of society differ from each other with respect to their rules and underlying rationales. The counter-hypothesis reads that gender quotas targeting different spheres of society do not differ from each other with respect to their rules and underlying rationales. Given the exploratory character of this article, both hypotheses are taken into account. While variation between the different groups of gender quotas is an indicator of intrinsic difference between them, its absence points to the likelihood that the difference mainly resides in the sequence of adoption.

Table 1. Documents analysed.

Law	Social sphere		Political sphere		Economic sphere
	AB.1990	AB.1997	EL.1994	EL.2002	B.2011
House of Representatives					
Bill and amendments	K.1129/1-2 (1989–1990)	K.860/1-4 (1996–1997)	K.1316/1-6 (1993–1994)	K.50-1681/1-4	K.53-211/1-12
Report parliamentary committee	K.1129/2 (1989–1990)	K.860/4 (1996–1997)	K.1316/4 (1993–1994)	K.50-1681/2	K.53-211/4, 10
Advice Council of State	K.1129/1 (1989–1990)	K.860/1 (1996–1997)	K.1316/1 (1993–1994)	See later	K.53-211/7
Plenary debate	47 PLEN 60 07/06/1990, pp. 2740–2742; 47 PLEN 62 08/06/1990, p. 2857	49 PLEN 162 15/05/1997, pp. 5762–5766, 5768	48 PLEN 32 29/03/1994, pp. 1304–1309, 1332–1349; 48 PLEN 34 31/03/1994, pp. 1464–1472	50 PLEN 234 29/05/2002, pp. 12–31; 50 PLEN 235 30/05/2002, pp. 40–52	53 PLEN 26 31/03/2011, pp. 52–61; 53 PLEN 27 31/03/2011, pp. 5–6; 53 PLEN 36 26/05/2011, pp. 148–149; 53 PLEN 39 15/06/2011, pp. 69–146; 53 PLEN 40 16/06/2011, pp. 104–105
Senate					
Bill and amendments	S.989/1-2 (1989–1990)	S.1-633/1-2	S.1053/1-5 (1993–1994)	S.2-1023/1-6	S.5-1097/1-5
Report parliamentary committee	S.989/2 (1989–1990)	S.1-633/2	S.1053/4 (1993–1994)	S.2-1023/4	S.5-1097/3
Advice Council of State	See earlier	See earlier	See earlier	S.2-1023/1	See earlier
Plenary debate	PLEN 95 13/07/1990, pp. 2787–2788	S.1-127 10/07/1997, pp. 3349–3352, 3390	PLEN 66 06/05/1994, pp. 2031–2047, 2051–2054, 2057	S.2-187 07/03/2002, pp. 21–35; S.2-188 07/03/2002, pp. 26–34	S.5-28 30/06/2011, pp. 35–51, 75–77

For each of the five cases mentioned earlier, the gender quota and the parliamentary debates preceding their adoption will be analysed. Four major aspects of quota rules are examined: (i) the quota (percentage) set; (ii) its naming; (iii) its sanctions; and (iv) the eventual supplementary rules. The quota set and its naming are indicators of the goal put forward; the sanctions and supplementary rules of the strictness of the quota. Next to this, the different arguments put forward pro and contra gender quotas are analysed in order to examine the rationales underlying the gender quotas in different social spheres. To this end, a close reading of the parliamentary documents was undertaken, coding the different meanings of gender quotas. Meanings refer to the signification of gender quotas, what they stand for or symbolise. For instance, gender quotas can signify more (or less) democracy, a misrecognition of women's skills and so on. This analysis leaves out other aspects put forward in the debates, such as the value of the advice formulated by the Council of State or other party initiatives related to the goal of gender quotas. Bills pass different stages before being adopted. Each bill submitted is accompanied by a commentary (the so-called *toelichting* or *développements*) explaining the motivation for the bill. The debates on the bill first take place within the parliamentary committee, then in the plenary, often preceded by advice from the Council of State. While the plenary debates are fully transcribed, the debates taking place within the parliamentary committees are summarised. Table 1 provides an overview of the documents analysed.

Belgian gender quotas

In Belgium, the first gender quota Act targeted the social sphere. It was adopted in 1990 (AB.1990)¹ and required that for each position on a federal advisory committee, all nominating bodies would present a male and a female candidate. The rule had to be applied from the next renewal of the board. No sanctions were stipulated. Six years later, the issue reappeared on the political agenda as the previous Act had had no impact. There was no increase in the number of women on advisory committees, and even the nomination of women candidates was not taken seriously in all cases. For example, male candidates were deliberately nominated for committees alongside less qualified women. In 1997, a new gender quota law was adopted (AB.1997).² It provided for a maximum of 67% of members of the same sex on federal advisory committees and for sanctions. Positions would remain vacant until they were filled with candidates of the required sex and advice would lack binding force until the quotas were met.

Gender quotas targeting the political sphere were first applied on the occasion of the 1994 European and local elections (EL.1994).³ The law stipulated that electoral lists must not comprise more than 67% of candidates of the same sex (actually, 75%, a temporary quota set for the first elections after the adoption of the law). In the event of non-compliance, the authorities would not accept the list. From the beginning, this Act was criticised because it did not insist on an equal number of women and men or impose a placement mandate to guarantee that women were given eligible positions on the parties' electoral lists. This criticism led to the 2002 gender quota Act (EL.2002),⁴ compelling parties to put forward an equal number of female and male candidates, including for the top two positions of each list (and at least one woman in the top three in the first election after coming into force). Non-compliance would again result in the list being rejected.

In 2011, the spectrum of gender quota Acts was broadened with the adoption of a law applying gender quotas to listed and state-owned companies, including the national lottery (B.2011).⁵ The boards of these companies need to be comprised of at least 33% of women members, formulated as being of a sex other than that of the serving members. Companies receive a period of transition in order to comply with the law depending on their size and status. Large listed companies are entitled to a period of five years to comply from the date of adoption of the law; smaller ones, eight. State-owned companies have to apply the gender quota without delay, given their 'role model' function. Companies not complying with the law are required to appoint women until they meet the gender quota. Otherwise, serving board members lose the financial and other advantages resulting from their position. In cases where the gender quota is not achieved a year from the date of application, the general meeting appoints a new board.

To what extent do these gender quotas targeting different spheres of society differ from each other? The quotas vary between a minimum of 33%, 50% and a maximum of 67%. There is no relation between the quotas set and the group of gender quotas. A 50% quota is applied to the political sphere (EL.2002), but was also used in the social one (AB.1990). And 33–67% quotas are used in all spheres (AB.1997, EL.1994, B.2011). There is a relation, however, with the level targeted, that is, candidates versus composition of the body. The first case only guarantees a certain share of women candidates; the second that they actually serve. A 50% quota has so far only been applied to the number of candidates. Of all gender quotas targeting the composition of the body none went beyond a 33–67% quota (AB.1997, B.2011). However, with the exception of the lists of candidates for the legislative elections,⁶ all except for the first gender quota laws targeted the composition of the actual (advisory) board.

A 50% quota is called 'equal' and a 33–67% quota 'balanced', and this applies across the different groups of gender quotas. The wording thus only relates to the quota set. Interestingly, B.2011 simply guarantees that women serve on boards. B.2011 is, on the whole, more traditional in

wording than the other laws in two respects. First, it only focuses on women, while the other laws accentuate the gender dimension, referring to men and women and the imbalance or lack of equality between the two. Only focusing on women involves the loss of the fact that their position is – in the case of gender quotas – the mirror of men’s position. Second, and related, B.2011 defines the gender quota as a minimum of 33%. While the minimum 33% refers to the under-representation of women – they should be at least 33% and have not yet achieved this threshold – it does not make any reference to men. All other laws applying a 33–67% gender quota refer to it as a maximum 67% of the same sex (AB.1997, EL.1994). While not necessarily mentioning men in this respect, a maximum 67% recognises the over-representation of men on advisory boards, corporate management boards and legislatures and puts a limit to this. B.2011, nonetheless, is similar to EL.2002 in using the verb ‘guaranteeing’ instead of ‘promoting’. While not containing any more guarantees than most laws adopted in the 1990s, the wording changed with the turn of the millennium. This turn reflects a shift from permissive legislation to one that is meant to trigger change. On the whole, then, there is no relation between wording and the group of gender quotas.

There also seems to be no relation between the group of gender quotas and sanctions. Since the failure of AB.1990, all subsequent gender quota laws have contained sanctions. In all spheres, sanctions focus on the rectification of the gender ratio: the refusal of lists of candidates (EL.1994, EL.2002); the need to leave seats vacant for a candidate of the missing sex (AB.1997); and the invalidity of candidacies of the over-represented sex until the required gender ratio is obtained (B.2011). While in the political sphere, this is the only sanction, in the social sphere, recommendations are not binding if the gender quota is not attained (AB.1997), and in the economic sphere, board members lose their financial and other advantages (B.2011). In this respect, B.2011 is an outsider since it is the first gender quota law in Belgium imposing financial sanctions. It also introduces the greatest number of sanctions.

Finally, there is a difference between the gender quota laws targeting the social sphere and the others in that the latter allow for a more phased implementation, prescribing a lengthy time frame of up to eight years and/or intermediary gender quotas. The latter are only applied to the political sphere. The presence of a phased implementation thus goes hand in hand with the group of gender quotas.

Parliamentary debates on Belgian gender quotas

Similarly to the previous findings, the rationale underlying the defence or rejection of gender quotas is to a certain extent similar for the three groups of gender quotas. A first rationale for all groups of gender quotas is that of equality. Proponents of gender quotas present them foremost as an equal treatment of men and women and equal chances for women. In EL.2002 and B.2011, gender quotas also stand for a step towards or the achievement of equality, and in the latter, also for the wish to overcome immobility in these matters. In two debates, AB.1997 and EL.2002, gender quotas are also framed as a step towards or the achievement of parity democracy, whereby parity democracy is understood in the French definition of the equality of men and women as the two basic components of human kind: ‘la femme fonde à l’égal de l’homme le genre humain et l’humanité’ (EL.2002). While occasionally referred to in AB.1997, the concept of parity democracy regularly comes back in EL.2002. The introduction of the zipper principle in particular stands for parity democracy *tout court*. In both debates and in EL.1994, reference is also made to the equal participation or representation of women in decision-making, which comes close to the logic of parity democracy. References to parity democracy are not found in the debates on gender quotas for the economic sphere, but extensive mention is made of the fact that one may not exclude on the basis of sex (B.2011).

A related rationale for all groups of gender quotas is that of power. With the exception of AB.1990, gender quotas are explicitly defined in terms of power in all debates. They break up existing power networks and make women have more power (B.2011), or half of the power (EL.2002), or simply redress the power balance (EL.1994), and lead to a shift in power between men and women (AB.1997). The debates also state that shifts in power do not arise spontaneously (AB.1997, EL.1994, EL.2002, B.2011) and that men have disproportionately more power (EL.2002).

A third, and more normative rationale for all groups of gender quotas is that of diversity. Gender quotas reflect esteem for the diversity of views present in society among women and men (AB.1997, EL.1994, EL.2002). Gender quotas reflect more attention to neglected groups and citizens as a whole (EL.1994, EL.2002). This issue is mainly raised in the debates on gender quotas for the political sphere, but it is also found in connection with the economic sphere, in that gender quotas symbolise a need for boards to reflect the composition of society (B.2011).

The counter-rationale to this one can also be found for all groups of gender quotas. In the eyes of opponents to gender quotas, the latter stand for the reduction of women to their sex and the privileging of sex over merit. This construction is to be found in all debates except for the first one on AB.1990. Gender quotas 'institutionalise' sex (AB.1997) or the division of men and women into two sexes (B.2011). Gender quotas represent sex as being a more important criterion for the good functioning of advisory boards than competence, skills, interest, experience and professionalism (AB.1997). Gender quotas symbolise the association of women exclusively with their sex and not their competencies, interests and other strengths (B.2011). Gender quotas stand for the fact that women have been recruited, selected or elected because of their sex and not their skills (EL.2002). Gender quotas only view women through the lens of their sex; women only count because of their sex (EL.1994). More generally, gender quotas symbolise the fact that women are not deemed competent (AB.1997, EL.1994, EL.2002, B.2011).

A fifth and final rationale to be found for all groups of gender quotas is related to democracy, but it is constructed differently depending on whether gender quotas are defended or not. In the first case, gender quotas are argued to symbolise the existence of a structural democratic deficit (EL.2002) or the failure of democracy to achieve equality (AB.1997, EL.2002). But they also signify that democracy is functioning well, being self-correcting (AB.1990, AB.1997, EL.1994, EL.2002), and that men and women decide together on how society should evolve, which is also a way of making democracy function (B.2011). Thus, gender quotas not only are a representation of the fact that democracy is working well, but also stand for progress (EL.2002) and civilisation (B.2011). To opponents, gender quotas mainly symbolise a limitation (EL.2002) or violation of democracy (EL.1994), in particular, the principle of liberty. Gender quotas signify the violation of the liberty of political parties to constitute their lists of candidates as they wish. This construction is mainly raised in EL.1994, but also appears eight years later in EL.2002. Even more dominantly, gender quotas are defined as a violation of the liberty of entrepreneurship, the main construction of gender quotas by their opponents in B.2011, as well as a violation of the public-private divide (B.2011). This negative construction in relation to democracy and the state is only to be found in the debates on gender quotas targeting the political or economic spheres.

Two further rationales only to be found in the debates on gender quotas targeting the political and economic spheres focus on the role of the state and questions of justice. Gender quotas stand for positive (EL.1994, B.2011) or state-driven discrimination (B.2011). The state is doing something it is not supposed to do, namely, creating equal outcomes, whereas its role is limited to creating equal chances. Gender quotas thus symbolise a *coup de force* and authoritarian attitude of the state (B.2011). More vaguely, gender quotas are constructed as representing the patronising attitude of the state, or its 'mania' for steering and organising (EL.2002, B.2011). Gender quotas symbolise the overall lack of trust in business (B.2011) and the lack of recognition of the capability

Table 2. Overview of arguments in parliamentary debates per group of gender quotas.

	Meaning of gender quotas	Social sphere	Political sphere	Economic sphere
Equality	Equal chances/treatment	Equal chances/treatment	Equal chances/treatment	Equal chances/treatment, no exclusion on basis of sex
Power	Parity (1997), equal participation (1997) Shift in power between sexes (1997)	Parity (1997), equal participation (1997) Shift in power between sexes (1997)	Equality (2002) Parity (2002), equal participation (1994) or representation (2002) Redress power balance (1994), more/half power to women (2002) Men have disproportionately more power (2002)	Equality, overcome immobility in matters of equality More power to women
Diversity	Men stick to power (1997) Value diversity (1997)	Men stick to power (1997) Value diversity (1997)	Men stick to power Value diversity Attention for neglected groups	Men stick to power Reflect composition society
Sex and skills	Prevalence of sex over skills (1997) Women reduced to their sex (1997) Institutionalisation of sex (1997)	Prevalence of sex over skills (1997) Women reduced to their sex (1997) Institutionalisation of sex (1997)	Prevalence of sex over skills Women reduced to their sex	Prevalence of sex over skills Women reduced to their sex Institutionalisation of male–female division
Democracy	Women not deemed competent (1997) Functions (self-correcting) Fails (to achieve equality) (1997)	Women not deemed competent (1997) Functions (self-correcting) Fails (to achieve equality) (1997)	Women not deemed competent Functions (self-correcting) Fails (to achieve equality) (2002), existence of structural democratic deficit (2002) Fails (violates principle of liberty)	Women not deemed competent Functions Fails (violates liberty of entrepreneurship; separation public–private divide)
State			Progress (2002) Assumes its role (2002) Patronising (2002), lack trust/competence to select candidates (2002)	Civilisation Assumes its role, auto-regulation does not work Exceeds its competence in steering society, authoritarian attitude Patronising, lack trust/competence to select candidates

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Meaning of gender quotas (In)justice	Social sphere	Political sphere	Economic sphere
(Causes) Imbalance		Justice <i>Positive discrimination (1994)</i> Lagging behind/exclusion of women, over-representation of men (2002) Thresholds (1994) Discrimination	Justice <i>Positive discrimination</i> <i>State-organised discrimination</i> Glass ceiling and other thresholds Conservatism and machismo

Notes: Arguments in italics are those pronounced against gender quotas. Years between brackets indicate that only that case of a specific group of gender quotas is concerned by the argument.

of those composing electoral lists to be competent enough to select the right candidates (EL.2002). The juxtaposition is that gender quotas suggest that self-regulation does not work, an issue much emphasised in B.2011, involving the need for the state to regulate and steer that which does not occur spontaneously. In EL.2002, this was put more explicitly, whereby gender quotas are meant to stand for the duty of the state to intervene in order for women to carry out the highest responsibilities to the same extent as men. In this context, gender quotas are also constructed as a sign of justice (EL.1994, EL.2002, B.2011).

A final rationale, which is also only to be found in the debates on gender quotas targeting the political and economic spheres, refers to the (causes of the) existing gender imbalance. Gender quotas symbolise the current over-representation of men (EL.2002) and lagging behind or exclusion of women (EL.1994). In B.2011, gender quotas are extensively and repeatedly framed as the recognition of a glass ceiling and the fight against the glass ceiling and other thresholds. In B.2011, gender quotas also represent a step against conservatism and machismo, which again reflects the idea of such measures as standing for the fight against mechanisms of discrimination or exclusion. In the debates on gender quotas for electoral lists, gender quotas reflect recognition of the fact that thresholds need to be overcome (EL.1994), and, more generally, the wish to fight discrimination (EL.1994, EL.2002), recognising not only discrimination, but also a willingness to act against it.

Conclusion

This article is interested in the different generations or groups of gender quotas, wondering to what extent they vary beyond the fact that they target different spheres of society – the political, economic and social spheres – and have been adopted at different moments in time. To this end, five generic gender quota laws have been analysed, which have been adopted in Belgium since 1990 and target these three distinct spheres. The results reveal a clear picture: at least for the Belgian case, gender quotas do not differ fundamentally across spheres of society. There are differences when it comes to the rules set. The gender quotas applied to the social sphere allow for no phasing in during implementation, whereas the others do. The later gender quotas for politics impose a 50% quota. And the gender quotas applying to the economic sphere are accompanied by more and different sanctions than the other groups of gender quotas. However, at least the latter two differences have to be put into perspective. There does appear to be an overall evolution over time when it comes to the Belgian gender quotas rules. Gender quotas became stricter, imposing gender equality or targeting the composition of the body as such, with sanctions in case of non-compliance. The differences between different groups of gender quotas might, then, be explained by the fact that the later gender quotas targeting the political sphere and those imposed upon the economic sphere are of a more recent nature.

Findings are similar when it comes to the rationales underlying the different groups of gender quotas. The debates on the different groups of gender quotas share many rationales. The biggest exception to this finding is that the first gender quotas (AB.1990) involved much less debate than the other cases did. Only very few arguments were found within the debates on AB.1990. For the rest, arguments mainly known from gender quotas debates in the political sphere are also found in the other spheres and there is a great deal of overlap and parallels between the debates on gender quotas in the various spheres. Interestingly, the framing of the gender quotas for the economic sphere differs from that of the other groups of gender quotas. It is unclear to what extent this was a conscious choice on behalf of the actors submitting the bill. But the fact that there are similarities when it comes to the debates shows that according to many actors partaking in these debates, there are many similarities between the different groups of gender quotas.

What does all this tell us? It makes us wonder to what extent these gender quotas, although targeting different spheres, are in fact dissimilar. They target distinct sectors and were adopted at different moments in time. And there are differences in the rules set and slight differences can be found in the naming and rationales underlying them. But it does not seem as if they differ intrinsically. The findings thus support the counter-hypothesis that gender quotas targeting different spheres of society do not differ from each other with respect to their rules and underlying rationales. Still, these findings have to be adopted with caution. This article focuses on a single country, with the advantage of keeping a number of background variables under control. The next step would consist of a cross-national comparison, comparing different groups of gender quotas across a range of countries. This would allow us to see to what extent the differences found in Belgium among groups of gender quotas are meaningful. Can similar differences be found across countries? In that case, they might be more meaningful than they seem at first sight and we would dispose of an indicator for the fact that different groups of gender quotas differ intrinsically. Or, do different groups of gender quotas within one country show more similarities among each other than with their equivalents in other countries and what factors would account for that? In that case, the counter-hypothesis now supported by the Belgian case would be confirmed: different groups of gender quotas would not intrinsically differ from each other.

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Notes

1. *Belgisch Staatsblad*, 9 October 1990.
2. *Belgisch Staatsblad*, 31 July 1997.
3. *Belgisch Staatsblad*, 1 July 1994. The Act applied to the 1994 elections and to all elections taking place from 1996 onwards (the 1995 federal and regional elections were deliberately exempted from the quota rules).
4. *Belgisch Staatsblad*, 28 August 2002; *Belgisch Staatsblad*, 13 September 2002; *Belgisch Staatsblad*, 10 January 2003.
5. *Belgisch Staatsblad*, 14 September 2011.
6. Belgium does not reserve parliamentary seats for women/men.

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