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Article

# Playing with different cards: Party politics, gender quotas and women's empowerment

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## Abstract

Although statutory quotas have considerably expanded worldwide, the bulk of gender quotas in place are party quotas used in the selection of candidates and composition of party bodies. This article aims to examine whether reforms addressing women's representation translate into greater power for women within political parties, thus providing new insights into how transformative gender quotas may (or may not) be in promoting gender equality in politics more generally. Specifically, we look beyond the distributive logic of gender quotas and examine instead the party institutional configuration in which patterns of distribution are realised, through the daily enactment of informal institutions. Our findings suggest that while unequal patterns of office distribution can be effectively fixed through gender quotas, this 'simple' solution cannot automatically subvert the main informal sources of male power in the party organisation. As change and continuity coexist, gender quota reforms are layering processes in which some elements are renegotiated while others persist.

## Keywords

Feminist institutionalism, gender quotas, political parties, power, women's representation

## Introduction

Although statutory quotas have considerably expanded worldwide, the bulk of gender quotas in place are party quotas, especially in Western countries (Krook et al., 2006). Existing research on gender quotas attempts to gauge women's empowerment after quota adoption by analysing continuity and change in political recruitment processes (Kenny, 2013; Murray, 2010; Verge, 2010)

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or women's impact on policymaking and the obstacles they face in parliamentary settings (Childs and Krook, 2009; Zetterberg, 2008). Hitherto, the impact of gender quotas on political parties *per se* has received little scholarly attention (Caul Kittilson, 2006; Meier and Verlet, 2011). Despite playing a key role in the production and reproduction of gender effects in politics, political parties are the 'missing variable' in women and politics research (Lovenduski, 2011: viii; cf. Baer, 1993).

This article fills this gap by exploring whether reforms addressing women's representation translate into greater power for women within political parties, thus providing new insights into how transformative gender quotas may (or may not) be in promoting gender equality in politics more broadly. Following feminist institutionalism, then, we look beyond the distributive logic of gender quotas and examine instead the party institutional configuration in which patterns of distribution are realised through the daily enactment of informal institutions, that is, through non-codified but still important rules and norms that may discourage women from being more active in terms of access, presence and agency (Krook and Mackay, 2011). In mapping these informal institutions, we undertake a comparative study of political parties in Catalonia, which, within the Spanish context, has a multi-party setting with a large variance in party positions on equal gender representation.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. The following section discusses our theoretical approach and presents the data and methods used in the empirical analysis. Next, we explore parties' gendered institutions and their impact on gender power relations. The final section concludes and suggests avenues for further research.

## **Analysing intra-party gender power relations: Approach, data and methods**

Following feminist institutionalism, to illustrate the way gender relations play out in specific institutional settings, that is, the operation of a particular 'gender regime' (Connell, 2002), we must survey the procedures and culture surrounding decision-making, as well as actors' interests and (ideas about their) environment (Lovenduski, 2011: x). The relative exclusion of women historically has made political parties 'institutionally sexist' organisations that host male-centred practices where women are expected to conform to the 'rules of the game' (Lovenduski, 2005: 48–53). Therefore, gender needs to be considered a central dimension to understanding the operation and effect of political institutions (Beckwith, 2005: 131), covering both formal and informal rules, routines, norms and practices that privilege certain groups over others (Mackay et al., 2010: 574), as well as the rituals that dramatise the spaces of gendered participation and the performativity of gendered power (Franceschet, 2010; Rai, 2010).

While institutions can be challenged, negotiated, subverted and resisted by gender equality activists (Chappell, 2006: 223; Kenney, 1996: 445) or by reforms such as gender quotas (Childs and Krook, 2009), the parallel existence or even contradiction between the 'rules-in-form' and the 'rules-in-use' may actually leave 'power relationships intact' (Leach and Lowndes, 2007: 186). Women are usually seen as 'space invaders' (Puwar, 2004: 67) and several 'rules-in-use' explain the prevalence of power inequalities – the fact that formal prerogatives are not coupled with effective capacity more often in the case of women than men. Thus, gender quotas – as formal institutions – might well provide opportunities; however, constraints on women's agency are typically entrenched in informal institutions. As Kenny (2013: 177) argues, 'gender – at both symbolic and interpersonal levels – provides embodied institutional actors with powerful means to resist innovation', so we should not underestimate the 'ability of in-groups to become self-perpetuating elites' (Chapman, 1993: 11).

We believe that a fine-grained analysis of gendered institutions requires a clear systematisation of the various dimensions of gendered power. In this endeavour, we build on Allen's (1999: 123) three-sided feminist account of power. *Power over* addresses the 'particular kinds of power that men are able to exercise *over* women'. Principally, we look at how masculinised party norms and practices constrain the choices available to women. Regarding *power to*, the 'power women have *to* act', we explore the strategies women deploy individually to subvert domination. Finally, for *power with*, 'the power that women exercise *with* each other and with men in allied social movements' (emphases from the original text), we examine women's alliances aimed at instilling more egalitarian ways of functioning within parties.

In seeking to map the informal institutions within political parties that may affect women's participation, we have adopted a cross-sectional approach comparing parties that have different commitments to equal gender representation, our main independent variable. In order to control for contextual factors, surveying parties from the same country is recommended. Since male dominance within parties is not country-specific (Dahlerup and Leyenaar, 2013; Lovenduski and Norris, 1993), we have selected a party system with multiple competitors that present high variance in party gender quotas and where gender-balanced representation has been basically achieved. Spain has followed an 'incremental track' to parity thanks to the use of party quotas and, most recently, to the statutory quota enacted in 2007 (Threlfall et al., 2005; Verge, 2012).<sup>1</sup>

Within Spain, while sharing the basic countrywide institutional traits, the region of Catalonia has a multi-party setting with a wide range of party measures in regards to women's representation, including 'strong' quotas (mandatory rules), both long-standing and recently introduced, and 'soft' quotas (informal targets and recommendations).<sup>2</sup> Taking claims about gendered institutions seriously requires a rigorous empirical analysis for which small-n comparisons are well-suited (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004: 734). The comparative empirical analysis we have undertaken includes five political parties. The Party of the Catalan Socialists (Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya; PSC), Republican Left of Catalonia (Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya; ERC), both social-democratic, and Initiative for Catalonia Greens (Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds; ICV, which is eco-socialist, constitute the Left block. Democratic Convergence of Catalonia (Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya; CDC) occupies the Centre-Right (predominantly liberal) and the Popular Party (Partit Popular; PP) is located on the Right.

Table 1 shows that all left-wing parties have adopted 'strong' quotas for both party bodies and candidate tickets. Yet, while the PSC's first quota was introduced in 1982 – the first gender quota adopted in Spain – and ICV's in 1991, ERC's quota reforms were not successful until 2003. The other parties have only employed 'soft' quotas, incentivised by the actions undertaken by their competitors (Verge, 2010). The PP assumed a vague recommendation of progressing towards gender balance in representation in the mid-1990s and CDC adopted a target for women's representation in 2003. Although the statutory quota has produced rather gender-balanced parliamentary delegations across parties, those with strong and long-standing party quotas (PSC and ICV) outperform the rest in levels of female membership and women in party bodies.<sup>3</sup>

While we might expect women to be more empowered in left-wing parties thanks to the incorporation of feminism into their normative background and their relationship with the women's movement (Caul Kittilson, 2006: 45), strong and long-standing quotas are more likely to lead to women's effective agency than soft and recent quotas. The former may have not only produced higher levels of women's numerical representation, but also instilled attitudinal, cultural and behavioural shifts (Franceschet et al., 2012: 239). Should we find no significant differences in the operation of informal gendered institutions across parties with varied political opportunity structures for women's empowerment, quotas may prove to be insufficient to subvert parties' gender regimes.

**Table 1.** Women's representation in Catalan political parties.

	Left			Liberal	Right
	ICV	PSC	ERC	CDC	PP
<b>First quota</b>	30% (1991)	12% (1982)	25% (2003)	Target (2003)	Recommendation (1996)
<b>Current quota</b>	Parity (2002)	Parity (2000)	Parity (2004)		
<b>Women deputies in Catalan parliament</b>	46%	40%	38%	42%	37%
<b>Women in highest party executive body</b>	44%	44%	21% <sup>a</sup>	27% <sup>a</sup>	37%
<b>Women membership</b>	38%	40%	32%	35%	33%

Notes: Parity is gender-neutrally defined (no sex below 40% nor above 60%). <sup>a</sup>These parties reach parity in the elected component of the national party executive. Yet, when *ex officio* members are added, women's presence sharply decreases.

Source: Own elaboration.

Formal party rules (written regulations on the composition and functioning of party bodies) have been contrasted with other sources that reveal the situation in practice. Interviewing the leaders of the women's sections of the five parties under examination was extremely useful for grasping women's collective power and alliances. In addition, five focus groups, one per party, were carried out with women local party officers.<sup>4</sup> Local party branches are the sites of members' participation and party officers are better suited to report both the expectations of women affiliates and the constraints affecting their capacities (Meier and Verlet, 2011: 116). The average number of participants per focus group was 10. A non-intentional sampling technique was applied following certain criteria to obtain variation in participants' age and the size of the town where the local party office was located. The same broad questions about women's participation in parties were posed to all groups, avoiding asking explicitly about how women might be dominated, or resist and subvert domination. Yet, a large amount of interpretation and experiences dealing with power clearly arose, as will be illustrated with several anonymous quotes.

Focus groups can be conceived of as 'collective interviews' whose main advantage when researching group relations is to allow for the translation of individual points into a common vision (Duchesne and Haegel, 2004). This technique fits very well with feminist political science, as participants can shape the definition of relevant questions around self-perceived gendered issues (Wilkinson, 2004). We can even argue that it allows identifying the 'personal' as 'political' when shared experiences and meanings are evoked around the gendered institutions that do not fit the out-group's needs and their impact on gender power relations is discussed.

We acknowledge that the substantive content of our analysis is grounded on and, thus, limited to the all-women composition of our focus groups. Yet, while mixed and all-male groups might offer valuable information, the former risk reproducing the gender power relations found in the party organisation and the latter may downplay or overlook the informal institutions that are unlikely to stand the test of public scrutiny and that benefit men as the in-group. Furthermore, this kind of sample allows us to contrast the insights produced by women and politics studies on political recruitment and parliamentary settings, which predominantly concentrate on women's experiences, with the operation of gendered institutions within political parties.

## Gendered rules of the game in party politics

This section researches the differential effects institutions have on men and women, namely, the gender-biased norms that define access to resources and social recognition, thereby creating power, and the mechanisms that sustain its reproduction. Specifically, we survey the 'rules-in-use' making for gendered party organisations from the perspective of *power over*. As one participant put it, 'even if women have many aces, the game is being played with different cards' (PSC, P7).<sup>5</sup>

### *Gendered norms defining access to resources and recognition*

Among Catalan parties, the feminisation of party bodies brought about by strong or soft quotas coexists with a broad array of gendered norms that lead to an unequal access to resources and recognition. Gender quotas have not been coupled with rules establishing the definition of the valuable merits and skills to hold party or public offices or the tasks associated with these positions. These requisites do exist, though, at the informal level and build on socially constructed masculine behaviour and attitudes. Institutional beliefs about the male experience regarding authority, competitiveness, ambition and certain forms of rationality as the norm routinise the relationship between masculinity and power, thereby blurring it, while simultaneously creating several double binds for women.

First, focus group participants highlighted that party officers are expected to speak and behave assertively and to compete aggressively for party or public office (ICV, P7). This creates a double bind for women since they are trapped within gendered social beliefs that view speaking assertively or aggressiveness as inappropriate for them but, within parties, alternative ways of doing politics are despised as 'weak, fragile and vulnerable' (PSC, P9). As emphasised by women local party officers, 'if you start a sentence with "I think" you are not granted credibility' (ICV, P7), or 'men peers suggest to you: "If you don't give orders by thumping the table with your fist, you don't show you're in command"' (PSC, P5, P8).

Consequently, as discussed in the focus groups, women's self-confidence in their capacities is severely affected. 'Fear' (CDC, P2; ERC, P2), 'constant insecurity' (ERC, P3) and the 'feeling of being out of place' (ICV, P2, P7) are thought to constrain women's agency. Many women admitted refraining from more active participation in party bodies out of not 'meeting' male standards and some of them even declared feeling alienated: 'We don't feel represented by these practices... We feel uncomfortable, so we step aside' (ERC, P2). Yet, focus group participants reported that the aforementioned double bind also entails that those women showing political ambition or assertiveness are often despised due to the prevalent gender norm that regards these traits as positive when found in men but not in women (PSC, P5; ICV, P2). We will later on come back to the practical implications of this double bind.

Second, focus group participants highlighted that the prevailing conception of doing politics based on the full-time dedication norm leads to women's frustration as they face the dilemma of having to choose between their personal and political lives. Underlying this painful choice is a 'feeling of guilt' for spending hours on party politics at the expense of family time, an experience, according to several women, unparalleled for most men (CDC, P1, P2; PSC, P7; ERC, P2). Party women thus confront the double bind of violating norms no matter what they choose: if long hours are put into party work, women violate social gender norms regarding care responsibilities; if they do not, women violate parties' full-time dedication norm. Not meeting the adversarial and full-time dedication norms makes many women give up on demanding both more resources for the positions they hold and running for party or elective office, thereby giving up key assets to exerting power within parties.



Third, the use of ‘gender appropriateness’ criteria in the distribution of political responsibilities observed in parliaments (Franceschet et al., 2012: 238) also occurs in parties. Both high-level offices (vertical segregation) and the most valued portfolios within party executive bodies (horizontal segregation) are predominantly allotted to men. As one participant put it, ‘some party portfolios are *de facto* for men and others for women’ (ERC, P2). Especially after quota adoption, many positions are not competitive across gender: it is either two men or two women competing for them (ICV, P7). Although the group discussions downplayed the traditional value attached to the different portfolios – thus challenging male normativity – its practical implications for gendered power were clearly raised.

This not only entails an asymmetric disposition of resources (money, personnel or office accumulation), but ‘masculine’ portfolios (like organisation or finances) also have more visibility and influence and can be the springboard to other relevant positions. ‘Feminine’ portfolios (such as welfare policies or social movements) are less likely to have these qualities, especially the party portfolio devoted to gender equality, as participants noted (CDC, P2; ERC, P3). Indeed, while several male ministers had previously occupied similar responsibilities in the parties’ shadow cabinets, the successive leaders of the women’s sections have rarely occupied top offices in government and none of them have been assigned to gender equality cabinet portfolios. Therefore, the gendered distribution of party offices entails another double bind for women: the more they focus on women’s, thus substantively representing women, the less they obtain recognition and successful political careers and the more they face marginalisation and powerlessness, as found in parliamentary settings (Franceschet et al., 2012: 238).

### *Informal practices sustaining women’s subordination*

Five main types of informal practices that prevent women from accessing an effective agency and, thus, sustain men’s power *over* women have been identified: gendered rituals in the daily operation of party bodies; super-surveillance of women’s performance; gendered informal sanctions; informal networking; and uses of time. As stated by one participant: ‘Men think we’re usurping the power they’ve long held, and this [sharing power with women] is an imposition (via gender quotas), it is not a voluntary act’ (PSC, P2).

First, several gendered rituals performed by men in party meetings are regarded by focus group participants as mainly aimed at ‘showing power off, because men are in need of external recognition’ (PSC, P9; also in ERC, P1). Rituals include, according to party women, participating regardless of not having substantive or non-repetitive points to make, and referencing previous contributions of male participants as a means to add legitimacy to one’s point, even if the author of the point was a woman and it was initially disregarded (ICV, P9; CDC, P7; PSC, P8). These rituals make the meetings unnecessarily much longer and ensure that men are conversationally dominant even in gender-balanced party bodies, as found in studies of legislative committees (Kathlene, 1994: 573).

Furthermore, women’s contributions are frequently glossed over and not recognised as valuable inputs by their male peers: ‘We’re not considered political agents.... I can’t believe parties still overlook the inputs of half the population’ (PSC, P2). Likewise, the tasks carried out by women party officers holding ‘feminine’ portfolios, especially gender equality portfolios, usually receive scarce attention in the meetings, making women feel that their responsibilities are basically redundant (ERC P4; CDC, P2; ICV, P7). Party women also complained that they often perform subordinate roles, such as taking the minutes and monitoring the implementation of decisions in-between meetings: ‘We do count for getting the work ahead, but it is difficult to be part of more relevant decisions’ (ERC, P3; also in ERC, P2; ICV, P3; CDC, P7). According to group participants, these

rituals make women 'feel tired and bored' and may induce them to resign at higher rates than men (ICV, P6; also in PSC, P5).

Second, as found by Puwar (2004) in parliamentary arenas, women carry the 'burden of doubt' about their competency and are often subject to 'super-surveillance' (PSC, P8; CDC, P3). The following quote is very illustrative: 'A man hesitates and he's thought to be thinking; a woman hesitates and she's lame' (CDC, P8). The scrutiny of women's capacity is perceived to be tougher after quota adoption. Women are frequently qualified as tokens (for being 'quota women') whereas men's competency is not challenged (CDC, P2, P7; PSC, P2, P7; ERC, P2). On other occasions, to meet the quota provisions, women are assigned to areas that they are not experts in, aggravating their insecurities and exposing them to more criticism (ERC, P4).

Third, as observed by Kenny (2013) in her study of candidate selection processes, gendered informal sanctions are often imposed upon women who show political ambition or assertiveness. The most frequent sanctions these women suffer are removal from high-ranked offices or 'a subtle weakening of their competencies' (PSC, P5), which may also lead to women's higher turnover. Whereas one participant noted that, 'In my town, two men competed to head the party list. Eventually, one of them became the head of the list and the other occupied the second position' (ICV, P7), another participant stated: 'I competed to head the party list, and I lost. I was displaced to an unwinnable position' (ICV, P2). Women who access high-level positions are also sometimes dishonoured with rumours about sexual favours to their male selector (ERC, P4; PSC, P4).

Fourth, women's agency is hindered by a myriad of informal networks, an area where gender quotas cannot be enforced, that circumvent formal decision-making bodies. The unequal allocation of power in politics is largely entrenched in the asymmetrical density of informal networks among women and men (Bochel and Bochel, 2000). Indeed, informal networking is depicted as the paramount characteristic of the male way of doing politics. As noted by one participant: 'When we claim that party structures are very masculine, we mean that decision-making very frequently takes place outside the formal channels – in bars, restaurants ...' (PSC, P2; also found in ICV, P7, P2, P4; ERC, P2, P4; CDC, P2, P7). It produces 'homosocial capital', an interpersonal capital that is 'predominantly accessible for other men as well as more valuable when built between men', as if women were 'illegitimate members' (Bjarnegård, 2013: 24, 28). As noted by one participant, 'even if women share the table with men, many topics are never discussed, and if they do, we are not included at all in the conversation' (PSC, P8).

Finally, time as a scarce resource for women was repeatedly emphasised as one of the major constraints on women's effective participation and as key to understanding gender power relations (PSC, P6). Supply-side factors that limit women's time availability (especially the unequal distribution of housework and caring responsibilities) interact with demand-side factors in the party organisation, such as the aforementioned full-time dedication norm. In particular, late-hour meetings and the time when informal networking usually takes place (late evenings, after the formal meeting has been held) are considered to sustain male power and, as such, these dynamics present a strong resistance to change. Party women in our study were also concerned with the excessive need for in-person meetings and too many surplus events to attend (PP, P1), while much of the work could be advanced through online communication (ERC, P2). Extremely demanding face-to-face interactions, along with meetings running too long due to the male rituals already examined, are experienced by women as 'a complete loss of time' (ICV, P9), which strongly demotivates their political engagement.

Generally, the empirical analysis suggests that parties' ideology and commitment to equal gender representation do not explain women's subordination since gendered informal norms and practices are found across the board. Yet, a feminist analysis of the effects of gendered institutions is only found among left-wing women and most liberal women. Conversely, most conservative



women, while aware and critical of some of the examined informal practices – concretely, late-hour meetings and the excessive number of events to attend (PP, P1, P3, P4) – do not identify them as protecting male power, but rather as disadvantaging women with care responsibilities (PP, P3, P4, P5). PP party women also reject the gendered character of informal networking and instead regard it as ‘a pragmatic way of operation in any organisation’ (PP, P2, P4) that women may join ‘depending on the party officers leading the informal network or the issue at stake’ (PP, P2, P6). Last, in their assessment of potential biases in valuing merit, most PP participants agree that ‘If you provide a strong reaction when treated as a token, you are not marginalised’ (PP, P9, P8); that is, fighting marginalisation is considered to be possible through personal responses (PP, P1).

## Challenging subordination: Women’s agency at stake

In this section, we look at the actions party women undertake to resist male dominance, seeking individual or collective empowerment. Particularly, we evaluate the exercise and effectiveness of power *to* (individual agency) and power *with* (collective action) and assess whether the ability to mobilise the resources of the organisation to improve women’s situation is counteracted by gendered practices.

### Individual agency

One means party women identify to challenge their subordination is to strengthen party decision-making bodies. Women stated that they refuse to participate in informal networks and follow the male rituals because these practices undermine the quality of democratic deliberation in formal arenas. Simultaneously, time constraints make women adopt a more pragmatic approach to political participation (CDC, P2; ERC, P1; ICV, P7). Party women commonly defined their political engagement as a ‘community duty’ or an ‘enriching personal experience for advancing policy goals’ to be performed for a limited period and only so far as it does not conflict too much with private life. As one participant noted, ‘women separate their political engagement from their personal life, whereas men’s perception of leadership and power is continuous across time and space’ (PSC, P5). Yet, the fact that most women keep ‘the exit door at hand’ (ERC, P1, P2; PP, P1, P2) partially explains men’s perpetuation in office: ‘women substitute for other women while men stay and accumulate more power and influence’ (CDC, P3; also in PSC, P1).

During group discussions, several women emphasised that an alternative approach to political engagement might be transformative for the quality of politics. One approach party women suggested is to include the realities of reproducing life on a daily basis and work-life balance into the political activities of both ‘normal’ women and men, so that the ways of doing politics can be transformed (ICV, P8; PP, P3). Another way suggested by party women is to manage time efficiently in their political participation: ‘I don’t need to have a three-course lunch and a bottle of wine with my colleague, we just meet and decide. We take into account time utility and don’t need to do all the “show”’ (PSC, P6; also in ERC, P4). This might be an empowering act since it questions the prevailing conception of politics as saturating all aspects of life and unmasking the ritualisation of predominant male practices, thus exposing power relations.

Another empowering device participants discussed is the ‘role model’ effect derived from women having reached the top of the party organisation. For example, seeing a young woman party spokesperson overcome her fears to speak in public ‘has made young women members feel they can also do it’ (ICV, P7). Another group highlighted the change generated by having a woman party leader: ‘If you need to leave a meeting because your child is ill, she knows what you are talking about’ (PP, P3). Women in high-ranking positions may thus act as symbols enlarging the array of

accepted political repertoires, politicising unacknowledged norms and practices, and challenging the prevailing 'logic of appropriateness'. This symbolic expansion is instrumental in women's political inclusion, although women's higher turnover rates limit the impact of the 'role model' effect.

### *Collective action*

The extent to which gender quotas succeed as collective empowerment mechanisms was initially distorted, as reported by the leaders of the women's sections, by the creation of new layers of decision-making not foreseen by party rules (i.e. smaller executive committees), which, as such, passed over parity criteria, and by the expansion of the number of members sitting in party bodies. With these strategic manoeuvres, power was not relocated in a more egalitarian way but 'shifted away' from women, as identified in studies of parliamentary settings (Hawkesworth, 2003). A practice still in place is using gender quotas to make two criteria coincide. Women often informally fulfil a double quota (gender and that of being independent candidates, migrants or young), allowing parties to project 'an image of freshness – and even beauty' (CDC, P7; also in PSC, P2; ICV, P10; PP, P3). While diversity is formally assured, these practices minimise the challenge to the in-group's power as men remain in their positions.

Both interviewees and focus group participants claimed to have aimed at 'letting the ladder down' to other women when acting as selectors, as found elsewhere (Caul Kittilson, 2006: 157). Nonetheless, they did not attribute this action to gender consciousness but rather to the plurality of women's networks. Getting more women in, though, is not easy. While men's responses tend to be 'I was waiting for your call!' or 'In what position am I listed?' (ICV, P1), common answers among women are 'I'm not prepared enough' (PP, P8; PSC, P5), 'I won't be able to' (ICV, P1; CDC, P2) or 'What can my contribution be?' (ERC, P3). Social ideologies about men's and women's skills may well limit women's will to accept offices (Lawless and Fox, 2005), but they are reinforced, according to several group participants, by the aforementioned partisan gendered norms that define access to resources and recognition.

Party women have also sought to build coalitions of support to feminise their organisations. In left-wing parties, feminist activists won male leaders' support in overcoming resistance to strong gender quotas, especially by male middle-level cadres, and in creating caucuses to discuss equality issues and plan actions. However, the leaders of the women's sections usually combine party responsibilities with full-time jobs outside the party, thus limiting their ability to build a strong lobby, and they are normally appointed by the party leader, with the exception of ICV. In left-wing parties (PSC, ICV and ERC), women's sections, joined exclusively by women, rank high in the party structure and their leader sits in the highest party bodies, including candidate selection committees, which allows them to supervise the effective implementation of gender quotas.<sup>6</sup> In these parties, the women's sections have also crafted alliances with the women's movement to advance common goals and lobby for equality policies.

Liberal and conservative parties present a different approach. CDC has a common section for all discriminated groups (women, disabled, gays, etc.) wherein participation is open to both men and women, which hardly equates to an intersectional coalition and might well contribute to diffuse women's demands. In the PP, gender equality policies fall under a catch-all sectoral branch devoted to social issues. Although the existing collective arenas for women's participation in left-wing parties seem to be more conducive to empowerment, both interviewees and focus-group participants noted that women's collective action is rather deficient. Women members remain largely unaware of institutionalised gender discrimination and feminist discourses are seen with suspicion (ICV, P8; ERC, P4; PSC, P1). Moreover, women's collective action faces strong hostility

by men – and by some women too (ICV, P9). It is often regarded as annoying, whereas men's complicity is never brought into question or considered political (PSC, P5; ICV, P5).

Left-wing focus group participants also deplored 'men's complacency with gender quotas', which seems to preclude further action as if equality was by and large achieved (PSC, P5; also in ERC P4). For example, the internal equality plans developed by left-wing parties to modify the organisational dynamics constraining women's participation are far from successful.<sup>7</sup> Although these plans have been effective in monitoring women's presence across party levels and public institutions and addressed gender inequalities in parties' communication policies, actions remain highly underdeveloped in some key areas, such as use of time: 'Making men think of time differently would erode their power; precisely, they use late hours to keep power' (PSC, P1; also in ERC, P2; ICV, P11).

Overall, irrespective of parties' ideology and commitment to women's representation, women seem to be deploying similar strategies to be individually empowered (*power to*). Yet, many of the strategies presented, such as alternative approaches to use of time, will only be truly empowering when mainstreamed in parties' organisational culture, thereby displacing the practices that only suit the hegemonic male roles in both the public and private spheres. In regards to *power with*, despite the limitations of the collective arenas discussed earlier, left-wing women have advanced more than their liberal and conservative peers by creating stronger women's sections and broader alliances within and outside the party organisation. Furthermore, higher representation in party bodies thanks to strong gender quotas has allowed left-wing party women to force their organisations to start revisiting their gendered daily operation – especially in PSC and ICV, the two parties with long-standing strong quotas, where the equality plans were endorsed by the respective national party bodies.

## Conclusions

The empirical evidence presented in this article suggests that political parties largely remain inhospitable spaces for women. While unequal patterns of office distribution can be fixed through gender quotas, this 'simple' solution cannot automatically address the complexity of gender power relations within parties. Irrespective of parties' commitments to women's representation, men still maintain power *over* women through a variety of informal institutions. The acts performed individually (*power to*) or collectively (*power with*) by women fail to subvert male dominance since they are counteracted by various informal gendered institutions that impose several double binds for women and determine their access to both party resources and recognition (even when holding equivalent positions to those held by men). As one woman explained: 'We have fought and won the formal battle but not the informal one' (PSC, P4).

Gender quotas certainly contribute to feminising party bodies (formal level), if effectively enforced. For them to subvert the main informal sources of male power in the party organisation, though, the time span may need to be much longer. As seen in this study, a few decades of quota implementation have been insufficient to significantly subvert the gendered patterns of participation and power relations. Yet, as the approval of equality plans shows, increased presence through strong and long-standing gender quotas has enabled left-wing party women to challenge some gendered institutions. As change and continuity coexist, we conclude that gender quota reforms are layering processes in which some elements are renegotiated while others remain.

Since the gendered ethos of parties is not country-specific, this comparative analysis of Catalan political parties adds new insights to the literature on gender quotas by showing that parties' gender regimes prove extremely resilient to change. Most likely it is not resistance to women as such, but rather to change as embodied by women since their presence may be disruptive. While rejecting

essentialist categories of men and women – that is, power *over* is not exclusively male – this article has shown a broad array of ways in which parties discriminate against women. The daily enactment of informal gendered institutions pushes women out of party politics and deters them from actively seeking nomination or re-election for either party or elective office. In this vein, this article is also informative for the literature on gender and political recruitment. In addition, we believe that distinguishing different dimensions of power provides feminist institutionalist scholars with a valuable analytical tool to explore its various gendered dimensions while taking women's agency into account.

Finally, by mapping the informal institutions at play within political parties, this article sets the stage for further comparative analyses on women's empowerment. Given that parties matter for women's political participation and representation, research needs not only to unveil how gendered power configurations hinder political equality, but also to identify under what conditions women's agency finds the most advantageous settings to pursue its claims. This includes considering how critical acts might change across space in different parties, as well as across women's groups stratified by ethnicity and age. As subordination affects all out-groups, further research should also survey the exclusion of non-hegemonic masculinities to problematise the power hierarchies found among men based on prevailing gender norms.

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### Notes

1. The legislative quota establishes that candidate tickets must include a minimum of 40% and a maximum of 60% of either sex, a proportion to be also respected in each stretch of five candidates. This quota applies to all elections and failure to meet its provisions entails the withdrawal of party lists by the electoral authorities.
2. 'Strong' quotas may entail party sanctions for non-compliance, whereas 'soft' quotas rarely do so (Krook et al., 2006).
3. At the local level, gender quotas often fail to be honoured in the composition of party executive bodies. Evidence from the only two parties with recorded data, the PSC and ERC, shows that women account, on average, for 35% and 26% of members in local party bodies, respectively (Verge, 2010).
4. Both the interviews and focus groups took place in Barcelona during 2011 as the elections held that year for different layers of government forced us to adjust to parties' tempos. Participants received a cover-sheet introducing the study so that they could make an informed decision as to whether to participate. Discussions were videotaped with participants' explicit consent to ensure an accurate transcription.
5. To hold onto our guarantee of confidentiality, we only report the party name and assign a random number to each participant (e.g. P7). Translation of quotes from their original language (Catalan and Spanish) has respected both the maximum literality and linguistic tones employed by participants.
6. Women's sections are often not found at the local level. This has strong implications for women's representation. In PSC, local party branches with women's sections have 40% women in their executive body whereas those without women's sections only have 31% women. In ERC, the percentage decreases from 31% to 19% (Verge, 2010).
7. PSC, *Equality Plan* (2001) and *Use of Time Pact* (2007); ICV, *Action Plan to Feminise the Organisation* (2008); and ERC, *Women's Action Plan* (2010).

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