

Gender Quotas and Women's Access to Viable List Positions: Evidence from the European Parliament Elections in Poland

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Abstract: *The article contributes to the scholarly work on factors influencing women's parliamentary representation by exploring the relationship between gender, gender quotas and the assignment of electorally viable list positions. Drawing on the insights from the existing scholarly work and feminist institutional literature, I investigate the impact of the introduction of legislated gender quotas in Poland in 2011 on the distribution of winnable positions on electoral lists in the European Parliament (EP) elections. I also analyse the role of incumbency advantage and national political experience in this regard, examining heterogenous effects between female and male candidates. The regression analysis relies on the original individual-level dataset created for this article, encompassing all EP elections in Poland to date (2004–2024).*

I find a negative relationship between female gender and the allocation of viable list position, suggesting a possible gender bias of party selectorates. This bias diminishes when accounting for incumbency and national political experience, implying that women's underrepresentation in winnable list positions is largely attributed to the unequal, gendered distribution of political and electoral capital. National political experience and incumbency advantage emerge as critical factors in the assignment of secure ballot spots, benefiting both male and female candidates equally.

Keywords: *women's representation, European Parliament, gender, descriptive representation, gender quotas, Poland*

Introduction

The European Parliament (EP) has long been identified as an assembly more open to women's political participation than many of the national parliaments in the member states (MSs) of the European Union (EU) (Dingler & Fortin-Rittberger 2022; Freedman 2002; Paczeński 2006). The proportion of women members of the European Parliament (MEPs) since the first EP elections in 1979 has been consistently higher than aggregated EU averages of women in national parliaments (Fortin-Rittberger & Rittberger 2014a). However, women remain descriptively underrepresented in the EP and full parity has never been achieved. The highest percentage of women MEPs was reached after the 2019 elections at 41% and is currently at 39%.

Poland is one of the eleven Central and Eastern European (CEE) EU member states. Despite their diversity, CEE MSs exhibit similar characteristics with regard to women's political representation: under-representation in legislatures, marginalisation in public debate and policymaking, persistence of gender stereotypes about traditional family roles and resistance to gender quotas (Chiva 2018; Chiva 2019). Poland's first elections to the EP took place in 2004 – the year of the country's accession to the EU. Similarly to other post-communist states, Polish women's national and European parliamentary representation is below the European average (29.4% of women MPs in the Sejm after the 2023 national elections and 28.3% women MEPs after the 2024 EP elections).

To remedy the low levels of women's political representation, in 2011 Poland adopted legislation imposing mandatory 35% gender quotas. Polish quota arrangements apply to district-level party lists. According to the Electoral Code of 5 January 2011, 'in the list of candidates: the number of candidates – women must not be less than 35% of the number of all candidates on the list; the number of candidates – men must not be less than 35% of the number of all candidates on the list' (Electoral Code 2011, Article 211 § 3). Polish quotas are strongly enforced: If a list does not fulfil the quota requirement, electoral authorities will not register it. The new quota regulations were first implemented in the 2011 national parliamentary elections. The outcomes were modest: compared with the previous parliamentary elections in 2007, the number of female candidates on electoral lists doubled, yet the percentage of women elected increased by only three percentage points. The first EP elections after the adoption of the quota bill took place in 2014. The percentage of women on the lists more than doubled, but similarly to the national parliamentary elections, the share of women MEPs from Poland increased only by two percentage points (from 22 to 24%).

Poland provides an interesting case study due to several characteristics. It is one of four CEE member states employing national-level gender quotas in

the EP elections (along with Croatia, Romania and Slovenia). At the same time, Poland is one of only four member states that have divided their territories into multiple constituencies (others are Belgium, Ireland and Italy). In the majority of EU member states, there is a single nation-wide electoral constituency for the EP elections. Poland is divided into 13 constituencies. In the 2024 elections, there were 53 MEPs to be elected (54 MEPs in 2004, 50 in 2009, 51 in 2014 and 52 in 2019), which gives on average only four successful candidates per constituency. In practice, this means that it is very rare for a political party to have more than one candidate elected from one constituency. For comparison, there are 460 MPs in the Polish lower chamber, the Sejm, and there are 41 constituencies in the elections to the Sejm, which gives, on average, 11 MPs elected per constituency (district magnitude varies from 7 to 20 seats). The EP elections in Poland therefore provide an interesting and unexplored electoral set-up to examine the ballot position effect (described by, among others, Blom-Hansen et al. 2016; Gendźwiłł & Żółtak 2020; Lutz 2010; Marcinkiewicz 2014).

The impact of gender quotas on women's representation in the Sejm has received considerable scholar attention (Gendźwiłł & Górecki 2023; Gendźwiłł & Żółtak 2020; Górecki & Kukołowicz 2014; Górecki & Pierzgałski 2021; Gwiazda 2015; Gwiazda 2017; Jankowski & Marcinkiewicz 2019; Millard 2014; Śledzińska-Simon 2018). No similar analyses have yet been conducted with regard to the EP elections in Poland. This article attempts to fill this research gap. I examine if women were underrepresented in viable list positions in the 2004–2024 EP elections in Poland and whether the introduction of legislated gender quotas in 2011 alleviated or exacerbated this issue. I also analyse the role of incumbency advantage and national political experience (electoral capital) in allocation of the most coveted list positions and the heterogeneity of the effect between men and women candidates. The regression analysis is based on the original individual-level dataset created for this article (Polak 2025a). The dataset covers all European Parliament elections in Poland to date (2004–2024).

I find a negative relationship between female gender and the allocation of viable list position, suggesting a possible gender bias of party selectorates. This bias disappears when incumbency and national political experience are taken into account, indicating that women's underrepresentation in winnable list positions is largely due to the unequal, gendered distribution of political and electoral capital. Importantly, the gender quotas in the EP elections in Poland do not appear to be related either positively or negatively to women's access to viable political candidacy. National political experience and incumbency advantage are key factors contributing to the safe ballot spots assignment, and women and men benefit from these factors to the same extent.

Gendered patterns of political selection

Gender and political candidacy

Candidate selection process is an interactive mechanism, where both potential, aspiring candidates (the supply) and selectors (i.e. party gatekeepers, the demand side) influence the outcomes of the selection process. Norris and Lovenduski (1995) demonstrated that both supply side and demand side of the political recruitment process need to be considered in order to understand women's underrepresentation in politics. From the supply side, women – for various reasons, including historical inequalities, deep-seated stereotypes and gendered division of work – might be reluctant to enter politics, or actively discouraged from doing so. On the demand side, a male-dominated party selectorate might hinder, or at least not support, female candidacies. To facilitate the analysis of the supply and demand model, Norris and Lovenduski created a 'ladder of recruitment' that identifies the subsequent recruitment stages at which candidates are gradually eliminated. In the extended version of the ladder (see Lovenduski 2016: 521), the final steps of the ladder before being elected to office is 'candidate safe seat or list position'. This step is the focus of this article.

Feminist institutionalist literature highlights the gendered dimension of the distribution of electoral list positions and its role in the persistence of women's political underrepresentation despite various positive actions towards gender equality (Bjarnegård 2013; Bjarnegård & Kenny 2015; Bjarnegård & Kenny 2016; Kenny 2013; Kenny & Verge 2016; Polak 2025b). Persistent gendered hierarchies and gendered power networks result in often predominantly male-dominated candidate selection processes. Parties are the key gatekeepers on a way to parliamentary mandates responsible for recruiting candidates for parliamentarians, constructing and shaping electoral lists, and promoting candidates. They have almost exclusive control over which candidates are recruited and selected. Political parties have historically been dominated by men and consequently are often characterised by – frequently unacknowledged – traditional conceptions of gender relations that might (although it is not a universal principle) disadvantage women's electoral opportunities.

This mechanism results in placing women in 'no-hope' list positions where they have little chance of winning (Bjarnegård & Kenny 2015; Franceschet & Piscopo 2014; Piscopo 2016). Women candidates are frequently overrepresented in unwinnable positions on an electoral list as party gatekeepers use the lower, electorally hopeless places on electoral lists for producing a balanced ticket (Luhiste 2015). Kunovich (2003) found that regardless of their political experience and party affiliation, women in both Poland and the Czech Republic were substantially less likely to secure the first list position and moderately less likely to attain other top positions. Gendźwił and Żóltak (2020) demonstrated that

Polish party elites exhibit gender bias in ballot-ranking patterns. No similar analyses have been done heretofore with regard to the European Parliament elections. I assume that women are underrepresented in viable list positions on electoral lists to the European Parliament. I test a hypothesis as follows:

H1: Female gender variable is negatively correlated with viable positions on electoral lists to the European Parliament.

Quota and its discontents

In order to counteract women's political underrepresentation, many countries around the world adopted gender quotas. Quotas are constitutional provisions or national laws that require political parties to include a certain percentage of women on party ballots. While quotas are sometimes described as a 'fast track' mechanism for increasing women's representation, their actual effectiveness has been disputable (Schwindt-Bayer 2009, Dahlerup 2005). The presence of national legislated quotas has been linked to higher proportions of women on electoral lists in elections to the European Parliament (Aldrich 2020; Fortin-Rittberger & Rittberger 2014a; Fortin-Rittberger & Rittberger 2014b). However, this has not consistently translated into an increase in the share of elected female officials. Cross-national comparative analyses have not found any statistically significant impact of quotas in increasing the percentage of women MEPs elected and in explaining the variation in MEP gender balances between member states (Lühiste & Kenny 2016; Polak & Lewandowski 2025; Stockemer 2007; Xydias 2016). Feminist institutionalist literature highlights the role of informal practices of subverting quota regulations (Bjarnegård & Kenny 2015). In many instances, political parties have circumvented the intent of quotas by placing women in unfavourable positions that are unlikely to result in electoral success (Aldrich & Daniel 2020). Kenny and Verge (2016: 363) note that:

in cases of quotas that do not have placement mandates, parties typically place women in hopeless seats or list positions, keeping the lion's share of safe seats and winnable positions for male incumbents or male newcomers, which erodes the transformative potential of gender quotas. (Kenny & Verge 2016: 363)

The 'paradox of gender quotas' suggests that while quotas facilitate women's entry into politics and through the first steps of the ladder of recruitment, it makes the final stages of the ladder more challenging due to competing with a greater number of female co-runners and a possibility of vote-splitting (Gendźwiłł & Górecki 2023; Gendźwiłł & Żółtak 2020; Górecki 2021; Górecki & Kukołowicz 2014; Jankowski & Marcinkiewicz 2019). Górecki and Kukołowicz (2014) demonstrated that the increase in the number of female candidates to the lower chamber of the parliament (the Sejm) brought about by gender quotas was accompanied by

a decrease in the average female candidate's chances of being elected. Aldrich and Daniel (2025) in their cross-national panel analysis of gender quotas in the European elections found that legislative quotas were in fact negatively associated with women becoming list leaders. There was no significant relationship between legislated quotas and the share of women being placed in the top ten percent or the top 25 percent of the election list (Aldrich & Daniel 2025: 87).

The absence of placement mandates in Poland's gender quota legislation and weak commitment among party elites to the idea of quotas have been suggested as key reasons behind the low effectiveness of gender quotas in Poland (Górecki & Pierzgalski 2021; Millard 2014). The distribution of rewards (including easily winnable positions on electoral lists) by predominantly male party elites is often characterised by the exclusion of women, which can be attributed to the influence of stereotypes and the out-group effect (Gendźwiłł & Żóltak 2020; Niven 1998). In this context, gender quotas are often circumvented by placing women in unwinnable ballot positions, as formal quota regulations are not enough to overturn the informal centres of male power within party elites (Bjarnegård & Kenny 2015; Verge & de la Fuente 2014).

Flis (2014) showed that after the first application of gender quotas in Poland during the 2011 national parliamentary elections, the average ballot rank of a female candidate was in fact lower than in the previous 2007 elections. Flis concluded that women added to electoral lists because of the quota requirements were predominantly relegated to the role of list-fillers and not list leaders (Flis 2014: 259). Gendźwiłł and Żóltak (2020) showed that women candidates benefited from the adoption of quota legislation in Poland, but the effect was belated. The positive impact of gender quotas was weakened by party elites' gender bias and the unequal distribution of electoral capital between men and women. I hypothesise that while quotas increased the overall share of women on electoral lists, the share of women in viable list positions has not increased accordingly. This resulted in greater underrepresentation of women in viable list positions and greater overrepresentation in hopeless list positions.

H2: The presence of gender quotas increases the negative correlation between female gender and viable list position.

The advantage of incumbency

It is widely acknowledged that already being in office translates into increased chances of re-election. In the case of the European Parliament, having prior MEP experience helps develop specialised knowledge in venue-specific policies, build personal networks, gain influence and seniority within EP committees, and master navigating and manipulating the policy process (Pemstein et al. 2015). Hermansen (2018) discovered that previous legislative achievements and leadership roles in the EP consistently positively impact re-selection by

the national party. According to Gherghina and Chiru (2010), prior experience in the EP positively affects a candidate's position on the ballot in European elections. In most of the world's parliamentary assemblies, the lion's share of incumbents are men. The incumbency advantage is predominantly male privilege due to which women newcomers face more challenges to compete with and defeat male incumbents to win office. What follows, a decrease in the proportion of advantaged incumbents, is expected to provide more room for female candidates to run for and win legislative seats (Schwindt-Bayer 2005).

Nevertheless, the incumbency advantage can also work in favour of women candidates in the EP elections and counterbalance gender bias at nomination stages. Once women prove their electability, political parties tend to re-nominate successful candidates regardless of their gender (Lühiste & Kenny 2016). Feminist institutionalist research highlights that party recruiters – often unconsciously – screen candidates based on criteria that often reflect their own traits and characteristics (Bjarnegård 2013). As a result, men with these traits can be privileged in the candidate selection process. At renomination, however, party recruiters can more accurately assess candidates based on their legislative and electoral performance. These indicators reduce reliance on initial judgments influenced by masculine norms during first-time recruitment, providing women with more equal opportunities (Adams & Smrek 2018). Smrek (2020) found that in the case of Czech MPs, women benefit from incumbency advantage in the re-nomination process to the same extent as their male colleagues. I investigate whether a similar situation takes place in the Polish elections to the European Parliament.

Domestic political capital

A candidate's electoral capital in the EP elections can be significantly boosted by previous experience in national politics. Aldrich (2018) found that 'national politicians are more likely to enter through vote-seeking parties who want to perform well in the EP election for national gain' (Aldrich 2018: 1284). In the 2019 European elections, Beata Szydło – Poland's former PM who headed the Law and Justice government from 2015 to 2017 – received a record-breaking half-million votes (525,811) in the Lesser Poland and Świętokrzyskie constituency. Throughout the five Polish elections to the EP (2004–2024), among 25 candidates with the highest number of votes received, there were six ex-prime ministers (24%), 14 (56%) ex-ministers and 20 (80%) ex-national MPs (own calculations based on National Electoral Commission data).

Meserve, Pemstein and Bernhard (2009) note that in their nomination strategies, national political parties can use the European Parliament as a testing field for young politicians, but also as a 'dumping ground' for candidates with little national political future left. These national politicians can be sent

to the EP either because they are insubordinate or troublesome, or because of their older age. In the latter case, an MEP tenure can be a rewarding retirement position (Meserve et al. 2009: 1030). Scholars list three European Parliament career advancement models: (1) EP and an EU-level career as the main interest, (2) EP as a stepping stone to national office, (3) EP as a retirement home (Scarrows 1997; Aldrich 2018; Daniel 2015). In the third scenario:

having served in national government for the bulk of his or her career, the MEP retiree is sent to Strasbourg to drink coffee with analogues from other European countries, biding time on the pension clock and musing about matters of continental importance as an avocation. (Daniel 2015: 5–6)

With the Polish delegation to the EP being one of the oldest in the EU (European Parliamentary Research Service 2019; European Parliamentary Research Service 2014; European Parliamentary Research Service 2024), the EP as a retirement home or a place of exile is a common career model. Given the high earnings of MEPs as compared with the salary of a Polish MP, this semi-retirement could be seen as a reward for loyal service to the party. According to Daniel, ‘lavish material benefits ordered by the EP would have the strongest effect on delegations from the relatively poorer expansion states, such as Poland’ (Daniel 2015: 144). The ‘EP as a retirement home’ model in the Polish context was colourfully described by Bartłomiej Sienkiewicz, at the time Poland’s minister of culture, who in March 2024 called the European Parliament a ‘sort of elephant graveyard’ for politicians of a certain age:

Some politicians my age go to a sort of elephant graveyard when their time comes. For the time being, however, I have things to do, so I have mocked the numerous rumours that I am about to be there. (Sienkiewicz 2024)¹

Yet, a month later, Sienkiewicz – an experienced, but also controversial figure in the Polish politics – was announced to be heading the Civic Platform list to the European Parliament in the Lesser Poland and Świętokrzyskie constituency.

Lühiste and Kenny (2016) found that the probability of entering the EP from national elected office is much higher than from regional or local politics and is fairly similar across gender (0.16 for women, 0.18 for men). I therefore hypothesise that

H3: *Incumbency advantage and national political experience are connected to higher chances of securing a viable list position for both genders and reduce the negative correlation between female gender and viable list position.*

¹ Translated from Polish by the author.

Poland and the European elections

This study examines the results of all Polish election to the European Parliament to date, i.e. the 2004, 2009, 2014, 2019 and 2024 elections. For the European Parliament elections, Poland is divided into 13 electoral constituencies. Accordingly, each electoral committee can propose 13 lists, one per constituency. There are ten candidate spots on each electoral list, resulting in 130 list positions nation-wide for each electoral committee.

Figure 1: Division of Poland's territory into 13 electoral constituencies for the European Parliament elections in Poland



Source: National Electoral Commission

Ballot rank and electability

In Poland, semi-open lists are employed in the elections to the lower chamber of the national parliament, the Sejm and the EP elections. Party leaders determine not only the composition of party lists, but also the ballot ranking of candidates. Voters may only cast a single vote, indicating the electoral committee of their choice and, at the same time, indicating a specific candidate from the list of candidates presented by that committee (Gendźwiłł & Żółtak 2020).

Gendźwiłł and Raciborski (2014) note that whereas Poland's semi-open list system primarily limits the parties' freedom to distribute the electoral chances of individual candidates, parties nonetheless have a number of instruments to influence the odds of candidates on their lists, and the most important among these instruments is ballot rank – the order in which candidates are placed on the electoral lists. Marcinkiewicz (2014) argues that characteristics of Poland's democratic system, i.e. the relative novelty of democratic elections, long candidate lists and high party volatility, might contribute to Polish voters' tendency to vote for candidates occupying first places on electoral lists, making the ballot position an effective shortcut for citizens. He furthermore suggests that 'the Polish electoral system provides incentives for voters to support candidates occupying prominent places on a party list... the ballot position effect in Poland is also an efficient shortcut for voters' (Marcinkiewicz 2014: 324). Millard (2014) found a positive, non-trivial correlation between list position and preference-vote shares in post-communist countries that have used a form of PR preference voting.

Descriptive statistics show that indeed in the European Parliament elections, Polish voters very rarely vote for candidates not ranked at the top of the ballot. 65% of all elected candidates were positioned first on the electoral lists (170 out of 260) and 20% were positioned in the second place on the ballot (51), leaving only 15% of Polish MEPs who were elected from the remaining ballot positions. No Polish MEP has ever been elected from the 6th, 7th or 8th positions, which are truly unwinnable seats.

Table 1 shows the success rates of candidates in each electoral list position in the EP elections (i.e. how many of all candidates in each position have been elected). The calculations are based on data that includes only viable districts, i.e. where at least one MEP was elected. Success rates of women and men at each position do not significantly differ, suggesting that voters follow the signals sent by political parties through the ballot order rather than being biased against female or male candidates.

Gender quota legislation

In 2011, Poland adopted legislation imposing mandatory 35% gender quotas for electoral lists. The new quota regulations were first implemented in the 2011 national parliamentary elections. When it comes to the EP, political parties have had to comply with the requirement of gender quotas since the 2014 elections. Table 2 presents the share of women elected to the EP and to the Sejm throughout the years, with a dashed line indicating the introduction of quotas.

Table 1: Ballot rank and success rate

Ballot rank	Success rate total	Success rate women		Success rate men	
1	89.0%	92.3%	36 elected out of 39	88.2%	134 elected out of 152
2	26.7%	23.8%	15 out of 63	28.1%	36 out of 128
3	10.6%	10.0%	8 out of 80	11.0%	12 out of 109
4	4.2%	2.8%	2 out of 71	5.0%	6 out of 120
5	3.6%	0.0%	0 out of 70	5.7%	7 out of 122
6	0.0%	0.0%	0 out of 80	0.0%	0 out of 111
7	0.0%	0.0%	0 out of 68	0.0%	0 out of 123
8	0.0%	0.0%	0 out of 64	0.0%	0 out of 126
9	0.5%	0.0%	0 out of 83	1.0%	1 out of 105
10	1.6%	2.4%	1 out of 42	1.4%	2 out of 143

Source: Own calculations based on National Electoral Commission data

Table 2: Percentage of Poland's women MEPs and national parliamentarians (lower chamber) and increase from the previous election

European Parliament (Polish MEPs)			Sejm (Poland's lower chamber)		
Year	% of women	Change from previous elections	Year	% of women	Change from previous elections
2004	15%	–	2005	20.4%	–
2009	22%	7 p.p.	2007	20.4%	0 p.p.
2014	24%	2 p.p.	2011	23.9%	3.5 p.p.
2019	35%	9 p.p.	2015	27.2%	3.3 p.p.
2024	28%	-7 p.p.	2019	28.7%	1.5 p.p.
			2024	29.4%	0.7 p.p.

Source: European Parliament, Szypulska et al. (2020)

While effectiveness of quotas can be incremental and prolonged in time, the lack of immediate boost in women's representation after the introduction of the quota bill can be explained by reference to ballot-ranking analysis. In the first EP elections held in Poland in 2004, a quarter of the candidates on electoral lists were women. The share of female candidates dropped to less than 19% in 2009. Following the introduction of obligatory quotas, a sharp increase to almost 43% was observed (24 p. p.). Quotas thus yielded a visible increase, and not only as regards numbers of women on lists. A similar, though less-pronounced, change following the introduction of quotas was visible as regards positions 1–3. Importantly, an analogous increase has not happened in the case of positioning first on lists.

Comparing electoral lists from the 2004 and 2009 elections (i.e. before the introduction of quotas) and lists from the 2014, 2019 and 2024 elections, the percentage of women on lists increased from 23.1% (2004 and 2009 combined) to 45.1% (2014, 2019, and 2024 combined). Yet, importantly, the increase was not balanced over ballot positions. The highest increase in women candidates is observed in the 9th (where the percentage of women tripled), the 6th and the 8th positions. As discussed in the previous sections, these positions are unwinnable, with no candidate ever being elected from these positions. Nevertheless, as Table 3 shows, the overall increase in female candidacies after the introduction of quota regulations also led to more women placed at the top of electoral lists, even if the increase is much smaller.

Table 3: Percentage of women in each ballot position, before and after the introduction of quotas

Ballot rank	2004-2009	2014-2024	Increase
1	16.0%	29.6%	13.6 p.p.
2	23.7%	42.6%	18.9 p.p.
3	28.4%	47.9%	19.5 p.p.
4	26.3%	39.6%	13.4 p.p.
5	32.1%	45.6%	13.5 p.p.
6	23.1%	55.6%	32.5 p.p.
7	27.1%	44.4%	17.3 p.p.
8	23.8%	50.3%	26.5 p.p.
9	19.0%	60.4%	41.3 p.p.
10	10.2%	34.9%	24.7 p.p.
Total	23.1%	45.1%	21.9 p.p.

Source: Own calculations based on National Electoral Commission data

Data, operationalisation and analysis

The three hypotheses stated in the section II are verified with a linear regression analysis. The analysis is based on an original dataset created for this study (Polak 2025a). I compiled information on all electoral lists and candidates from all EP elections. Data was sourced from publicly available files provided by the National Electoral Commission. I use this data to understand whether there are systematic gender differences in the practice of distribution of viable electoral list positions (see Grahn 2024).

Lists of electoral committees that have not had even one MEP elected from their lists during each election were removed. This resulted in the analysis of

electoral lists of eight committees in 2004, four committees in 2009, five in 2014, three in 2019 and five in 2024. As discussed before, there are 13 constituencies in the EP elections in Poland, and there can be maximum of ten candidates in each list. Hence, each electoral committee² had 130 list positions to fill in each election. The total number of observations equals 3,215. Every candidate was coded by gender, constituency, electoral committee, party affiliation, ballot rank, type of list position (viable/unviable) and various other information. In total, 1,114 (34.7%) of candidates were women and 2,101 (65.3%) were men.

The dependent variable is binary: 1 if a candidate was assigned a viable list position and 0 for any other list position. Scholars employ various approaches to operationalising a viable (or winnable/safe) ballot position (e.g. Kunovich 2012; Put et al. 2021; Smrek 2023). Given the specificity of the Polish electoral system in the European elections, where it is extremely rare for a party to win more than one seat in one constituency, I follow the restrictive operationalisation of a viable position proposed by Gendźwiłł and Żółtak (2020):

For the lists winning seats in a given district, the viable ballot positions are $\{1... m\}$, where m is the party magnitude. (Gendźwiłł & Żółtak 2020: 211–212)

As noted by Gendźwiłł and Żółtak, employing a broader conceptualisation of safe positions could lead to including too many positions as viable, which ‘can actually obscure the real placement strategies, which are unfavourable for female candidates, and thus could lead us to underestimate negative ballot ranking bias and, possibly, overestimate the positive influence of quotas on female candidates’ chances’ (Gendźwiłł & Żółtak 2020: 212). Out of 260 viable list positions in the dataset, 219 (84%) translated into successful election to the EP. The remaining 41 MEPs were ‘ballot jumpers’ who ‘jumped over’ their better-positioned colleagues from the same electoral list (Smrek 2023: 324).

The predictive variables include gender (female dummy), quotas, incumbency and two variables related to domestic political experience. They mark whether a candidate had past experience in the Polish government, serving either as (1) a minister (*Ex-Minister*) or (2) a prime minister or a deputy prime minister (*Ex-PM or Vice-PM*). These categories are generally not exclusive and in fact politicians frequently gain experience as a member of the cabinet before heading the government. However, for the sake of this analysis each candidate is coded either in one or the other category, with experience as PM or Vice PM taking precedence over ministerial experience. This is dictated by the fact that a past position in the Cabinet of Ministers is used as a proxy for political

2 I use the notion of electoral committees and not political parties because in the past European elections Polish parties frequently run in coalitions, with two or more political parties forming one electoral committee.

capital, position within a political party and recognisability among the Polish electorate, and I assume that past experience as PM or Vice PM translates into a higher level of all these advantages.

Each predictive variable is interacted with female dummy (*gender*). In case of quotas, I am only interested in the interaction with gender to see how the presence of quota legislation is related to women’s access to viable list positions. In case of incumbency and national political experience, the interactions indicate whether there is heterogeneity in effect between female and male candidates. Table 4 presents descriptive statistics for different variables and distribution between female and male candidates.

Table 4: Distribution of variables in the dataset

Variable	Value	Men	Women	Total
Election year	2004	754	251	1005
	2009	419	101	520
	2014	373	277	650
	2019	203	187	390
	2024	352	298	650
Incumbent	0	1995	1083	3078
	1	106	31	137
Minister	0	1983	1078	3061
	1	118	36	154
Prime Minister or Deputy PM	0	2085	1110	3195
	1	16	4	20
Viable list position	0	1904	1051	2955
	1	196	64	260
Ballot jumper	0	2070	1104	3174
	1	30	11	41

Source: Author

Control variables include election year,³ based on the assumption that there is a linear trend in women’s access to political candidacy. Another control variable is the number of electoral committees per election. The latter control is added because the number of electoral committees directly translates into the number

³ Due to multicollinearity issues, including fixed effects for election was not possible.

of candidates in each election. For example, in the 2019 elections, the main opposition parties created one wide coalition committee in order to defeat the then-ruling Law and Justice party. As a result, several large and well-established parties, including the Civic Platform, the Democratic Left Alliance and the Polish People's party, had to share 130 positions on electoral lists (10 positions per list, 13 constituencies) among one coalition, instead of having 13 lists to fill by each party separately. The total number of candidates in 2019 equalled 390 (three electoral committees). For comparison, in the previous (2014) and subsequent (2024) elections, elected MEPs came from five electoral committees, resulting in 650 observations for each of those election years (see Table 4).

All models incorporate fixed effects for electoral committees and electoral constituencies. The results are presented in Table 5.

Model 1 includes only gender and control variables. The results indicate that when other predictive variables are not accounted for, women are indeed less likely to be assigned a safe seat in the EP elections, confirming their underrepresentation in viable list positions and a possible gender bias (Hypothesis 1).

Model 2 adds the interaction between quota and gender and shows that there is no statistically significant difference in safe spots assignment for women candidates before and after the introduction of quota regulation in Poland. This result suggests that H2 should be rejected; the presence of quota regulation does not appear to be related either positively or negatively to women's access to viable list positions in the European Parliament elections in Poland.

Model 3 introduces the incumbency variable, which proves to be a remarkably important factor contributing to the safe seat assignment. When interacted with the gender dummy, the variable is no longer significant, indicating that incumbency advantage is similar for women and for men.

Model 4 adds the previous national political experience of candidates into play. Both ministerial experience and PM or deputy PM experience turn out to be key variables influencing candidates' ballot ranking in the European elections. Similarly to incumbency, the interaction of both variables with the female dummy proves to be insignificant, indicating that previous national political experience benefits both women and men to the same extent. The third hypothesis (H3) is therefore confirmed. In model 4, the gender variable becomes insignificant, which could suggest that gender bias is connected to the unequal distribution of incumbency and unequal access to political capital.

Model 5 removes quota and the interaction of quota and gender. Most of the estimations do not change. However, interestingly, the gender variable becomes significant in such model specification, hinting that when electoral capital is controlled for, a marginal gender bias in distribution of winnable list spots remains, and that quota regulation mitigates that bias.

Table 5: Regression analysis

<i>Predicted variable: viable list position</i>					
<i>Predictive variables</i>	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>	<i>Model 5</i>
Gender (female dummy)	-0.041*** (0.010)	-0.028* (0.013)	-0.025* (0.012)	-0.020 (0.011)	-0.017* (0.007)
Quota		0.003 (0.012)	-0.012 (0.018)	-0.003 (0.019)	
Quota*Gender		-0.022 (0.016)	-0.004 (0.015)	0.005 (0.015)	
Incumbent			0.481*** (0.051)	0.387*** (0.053)	0.387*** (0.053)
Incumbent*Gender			0.105 (0.102)	0.114 (0.096)	0.116 (0.095)
Ex-Minister				0.299*** (0.055)	0.298*** (0.055)
Ex-Minister*Gender				-0.096 (0.102)	-0.095 (0.102)
Ex-PM of Vice-PM				0.456*** (0.124)	0.455*** (0.124)
Ex-PM or Vice-PM*Gender				0.195 (0.146)	0.197 (0.146)
No of Electoral Committees	-0.007** (0.003)	-0.007* (0.003)	-0.004 (0.004)	-0.007 (0.004)	-0.007* (0.003)
Election Year	0.003*** (0.001)	0.003*** (0.001)	0.001 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.001)
Electoral Committee FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constituency FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	-6.142*** (1.503)	-6.701*** (1.946)	-2.565 (3.929)	2.646 (4.337)	2.876 (2.322)
N	3215	3215	3215	3215	3215
Adjusted R ²	0.059	0.059	0.192	0.250	0.251
Within R ²	0.001	0.010	0.151	0.213	0.213

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Robust SE clustered at constituency*electoral committee levels in parentheses

Source: Author

Discussion and conclusions

This article has analysed the relationship between gender, gender quotas, political capital and the assignment of viable list positions in the European Parliament elections in Poland. The findings indicate that the unequal access to winnable electoral list positions is largely due to unequal distribution of incumbency and national political capital between men and women. Nevertheless, it appears that even when these factors are controlled, a marginal gender bias of party gatekeepers remains, and the presence of quota regulation might mitigate that gender bias to some extent.

The dominant role of electoral capital – in a form of incumbency advantage or national political experience – highlights the importance of historical path dependencies for women’s access to viable political candidacy. The gendered nature of access to top positions in national government, rooted in centuries-long women’s exclusion from the world of politics and from public life, at the present time translates into gendered imbalances in political capital and resources. To illustrate this statement with the data from the five consecutive European Parliament elections in Poland, out of 20 ex-prime ministers and ex-deputy prime ministers candidacies on electoral lists, only four (20%) were women. Ex-ministers appear 154 times in the dataset, and less than one-fourth (23%) of the candidates with ministerial experience are women (see Table 4). Out of 137 incumbents, 23% were women. As evidenced by this study, incumbency and national political experience provide a great advantage when it comes to the allocation of the most coveted list positions, explaining to a large extent the unequal access to viable political candidacy between men and women.

From a theoretical perspective, such results can be understood through the notion of path dependence, ‘borrowed’ by feminist institutionalists from historical institutionalism. ‘Once a particular path is taken, institutions become self-reinforcing, or “sticky,” and reforms that attempt to shift the path of an institution are difficult to effect, even when these choices appear better or more efficient’ (Mackay et al. 2010: 577). Historical underrepresentation of women in parliamentary assemblies in general, and in the European Parliament more specifically, influences the higher shares of incumbent candidates among men and women, in turn perpetuating unequal access to winnable list positions. Similarly,

a long history of male dominance in politics has given rise to informal norms and rules that help to perpetuate the status quo by making male politicians appear as more qualified and more worthy of being invested into in the form of trust and/or additional political opportunities. (Smrek 2022: 88–89)

On the other hand, the analysis also demonstrated that there is no difference between men and women candidates with regard to the positive relationship between incumbency and national political experience and being rewarded with a viable list position. These results support the outcomes of previous studies (Lühiste & Kenny 2016; Smrek 2020). What is more, once women possess the same electoral capital as men (either in the form of incumbency advantage or national political experience), the party gatekeepers gender bias in the allocation of viable list positions is small and likely to be mitigated by quota legislation.

In view of these findings, it seems important to consider long-term and indirect effects of gender quotas on increasing women's electoral capital. Cross-country studies show that gender quotas enhance perceptions of women's abilities as political leaders. They also boost support for women's political leadership among women themselves (Allen & Cutts 2018; O'Brien & Rickne 2016). The introduction of gender quotas can serve as a consciousness-raising event, leading to increased political knowledge and engagement among younger women (Venturini 2024). In the longer term, quotas are a factor in improving the competence of the political class through bringing about resignations of mediocre male leaders (Besley et al. 2017). They can also break down negative stereotypes against women politicians (De Paola et al. 2010).

While, as in the Polish case, quota regulations might not bring an immediate surge in the number of elected women, in the longer term they may be responsible for the increasing political capital of women and improving party elites' and society's perceptions of women leaders, which consequently translates (as shown in this article) into a more gender equal access to viable political candidacy.

Conflict of interest statement

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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