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Introducing gender quotas in politics is often a difficult endeavour: quotas tend to trigger controversial debates between those who find them a necessary, just and legitimate measure to redress women's under-representation, and those who think that they are arbitrary, discriminatory, contrary to the free will of the voter or an obstacle to national cohesion. More or less explicitly, quota debates extend to issues much wider than the narrow question of women's presence in parliament: discourses on gender quotas express contrasting understandings of political justice; gender, gender identities and gender inequalities; and the role of the state with regard to social and political inequalities between women and men. More generally, quota debates can be considered as sites of struggle for the redefinition of the relation between gender, justice and the political.

This paper explores some of the issues at stake in quota debates. It focuses mainly on the level of discourse, e.g. where political 'problems' are framed and 'solutions' to them defined, conceptualised and legitimised. At this level, quota debates are struggles over the meaning of words, categories, conceptual boundaries and connections or disconnections. Such processes can best be

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analysed using discourse-analytical approaches, which are becoming increasingly important in the social sciences.¹

QUOTAS, GENDER AND JUSTICE

Gender quotas challenge dominant norms of political justice at two levels: redistribution and recognition (Fraser, 1997; Young, 1990). The *redistributive* challenge consists in the obvious fact that quotas are aimed at a redistribution of seats and power in favour of women. Although the principle of gender equality as such is widely shared and recognised, it rarely manifests itself in a commitment to assuring women half of the seats in important political bodies. The only countries where gender parity in parliament currently is nearly achieved are Rwanda and Sweden

(49 per cent and 45 per cent female MPs at the national level). Most quota regulations throughout the world fix quotas at less than 50 per cent, and the majority of all existing quota laws set candidate or list quotas, not result quotas (see: www.quotaproject.org). Where quotas are set at 50 per cent, they tend to be designed in such a way that women will not end up getting 50 per cent of the seats. The best example is the French parity law that fixes a 50 per cent candidate quota for national elections to the lower house. But due to insufficient sanctioning mechanisms and an absence of political will in the political parties, the law has remained 'harmless' at the national level (Genisson, 2002; Observatoire de la parité, 2002): in the 2002 elections *with* the parity law, women gained no more seats than in the previous elections without the law (i.e. 12 per cent; cf. Sineau, 2002). Finland is currently one of the rare countries to have to deal with women's *over*-representation in certain bodies (see the article by Holli in this symposium).

Gender quotas also challenge the norms of political justice in terms of *recognition*. Indeed, the adoption of electoral quotas implies the discursive reframing of concepts and categories in such a way as to make quotas a legitimate and acceptable 'solution' to a commonly recognised 'problem'. This framing process includes various issues (Bacchi, 1999). In the first place, quotas become plausible only if women's political under-representation is considered a normative problem worthy of political action. This has been the case mainly since the 1980s and early 1990s: politically, under pressure from feminist movements, and in normative political theory where gender equality has been considered a relevant factor in theories

of justice and democracy (Young, 1990; Phillips, 1995; Okin, 1991).

Secondly, gender quotas are necessarily grounded in the idea that 'women' and 'men' are in some way different, distinguishable and coherent categories of people, that every adult citizen fits into one (and only one) of these categories, and that these two categories adequately capture the ways in which people define themselves, their interests and identities. Before the emergence of second-wave feminism, this assumption was commonly accepted, and gender categories were considered a 'natural fact' devoid of political and moral relevance. Feminist activists and theorists from the 1980s onwards called this assumption into question, first by focusing on social inequalities between women and men, then by politicising gender itself as a political category. From this latter perspective, gender is conceived as a social construction expressing and enforcing social power relations (Bacchi, 1996; Harrison and Hood-Williams, 2002; Carver, 1996). 'Men' and 'women' then become 'problematic' categories that reflect social power relationships rather than biological differences. Participants in gender quota debates unavoidably have to engage with these categories in one way or another. They can choose to define 'men' and 'women' in essentialist or sociological terms. Essentialist categorisations (Agacinski, 2001) can be criticised for failing to take into account the political nature of these categories, and sociological categorisations for being reductionist, e.g. failing to acknowledge the diversity among men and women (Carver, 1996) and the complex intersections of gender with other variables such as ethnicity, class, nationality or physical

and mental ability (Weber, 2001).

Thirdly, for quotas to become 'thinkable', the presumed difference between men and women must be constructed in such a way that it legitimises the relative benefits women (collectively or individually) will gain thanks to quotas, and the relative losses men (collectively or individually) will suffer. Various strategies are possible to achieve this goal. The concept of difference can for instance be used – as it often is – to focus on women. Women are then defined as *disadvantaged in comparison to men*, be it as collective 'victims' of social injustice or historical traditions or as a social group in need of 'special rights'. But women can also be depicted as *inherently different but equal to men*, which legitimises an extension of universal rights to women (Bereni and Lépinard, 2004). Finally, the presumed difference between men and women could also be framed in terms of discrimination against women *by men* as the main power holders in society. Attention is thereby drawn to men as the *advantaged* category in society rather than to women as the disadvantaged category. This latter strategy, however, is hardly ever used (Bacchi, 1999: 93–111; Eveline, 1994).

QUOTA DEBATES IN CONTEXT

Processes of problematisation, categorisation and legitimation such as those described in the previous section are central to any debate on gender quotas and can be analysed as such, by focusing on quota debates as autonomous objects of analysis. Such an approach is most appropriate if the analytical goal is to understand the discursive strategies used by the participants of particular quota debates.

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But quota debates can also be analysed as part of a wider political context that constrains and shapes them. Such a perspective is useful if the aim is to analyse quota debates as part of wider processes of redefinition of the public sphere. The following contextual elements could for instance be considered.

Firstly, quota debates take place within an institutional and normative context. In countries with pluralist models of representation, social identities are usually recognised as relevant for political representation. Such countries often have some form of quotas for other groups. If this is the case, quotas for women sometimes get discursively linked to these other quotas. This link can facilitate the introduction of gender quotas under the condition that gender is accepted as another social category with legitimate claims to representation. This was the case for instance in Belgium where gender quotas were relatively easily accepted as simply one more quota that fitted into the general normative framework of a 'politics of presence' (Meier, 2000 and 2002). In other cases, however, the existence of quotas for other groups has been of no help for advocates of gender quotas, rather the opposite. In Switzerland, for example, the opponents of gender quotas successfully framed the latter as 'altogether different' from existing quotas for

territorial minorities. This radical 'difference' made them appear wholly illegitimate (Sgier, 2003).

In countries with a universalist tradition where quotas generally do not fit into the logic of the political system, proponents of gender quotas have the difficult task of advocating quotas without giving the impression that they want to jeopardise the universalist logic. In France, the fear of a 'fragmentation' and 'Americanisation' of the system through quotas was salient in the debates on the parity law passed in 2000. The problem was circumvented by re-labelling gender quotas as gender 'parity' and by advocating parity as a realisation of the universalist ideals of the Revolution rather than as an instrument targeting a particular group. The debate was kept firmly within the universalist 'repertoire' (Lépinard, 2002) and disconnected from anything remotely resembling 'category politics' (Bereni and Lépinard, 2004). As in Finland – another country with a universalist tradition – quotas were framed as an instrument for the promotion of the 'common good' and the cohesion of the nation (Raevara, 2003).

Secondly, gender quotas sometimes get linked to other issues debated at the same time. The French debate on gender parity for example was closely linked to the debate on same-sex marriage ('Pacs'). Whereas the parity debate called into question the dominant norms ruling the public sphere, the debate on same-sex marriage can be considered a challenge to the hetero-normativity of the family, as institutionalised by the state (see Fassin and Feher, 2001). Many participants in the parity debate explicitly linked their opinions regarding these two issues: some approved of both, some disapproved of both, and others

were either in favour of the parity law and against same-sex marriage, or the reverse (Fassin and Feher, 2001). In this particular case, both the parity project and the same-sex marriage project were related to the gender dimension of the public sphere.

Thirdly, debates over quotas for women are sometimes related to wider projects of democratisation and modernisation. This was the case in various 'young' democracies in Latin America that chose a 'fast track' to introduce quotas for women, for instance Argentina and Costa Rica. But even in established democracies, quotas have sometimes been framed as a means to prove that the country is living up to international standards of gender equality, as in the case of the Scandinavian countries (Dahlerup, 2003; Peschard, 2002). In France, the parity law has often been referred to as a 'pioneering' law and as an exemplary case of French 'exceptionalism' (Sénac-Slawinski, 2002). In the former Communist countries, on the other hand, quotas tend to be considered contrary to political modernisation: they have a negative connotation because they remind people of measures of 'forced emancipation' that used to be imposed on them by Soviet rule (Dahlerup and Freidenvall, 2003).

CONCLUSION

Controversies over gender quotas in politics entail struggles at two levels: the redistribution of seats and the discursive reframing of the world. At this latter – discursive – level, the struggles concern the problematisation of women's under-representation as a normative issue, the re-conceptualisation of gender categories and the legitimisation of a redistribution of power in

favour of women. Debates over such issues can be analysed on their own or in relation to broader normative and institutional frameworks, wider processes of political change, and issues that are in one way or another connected to gender quotas. Comparative analyses of gender quota debates in different contexts are a particularly rich field for future research. Such analyses could further our understanding of the links between quotas debates and institutional-normative contexts and traditions. They could also give us a better understanding of gender-specific resistances to quotas (see the article by Meier in this symposium) and, more generally, of processes of social construction of gender as a central element of 'category politics' (Bacchi, 1996). Debates over gender quotas both express a certain categorisation of the world, and help create it. They are therefore part of wider processes of a 'reinvention' of justice, gender and the political: they are 'politics', if politics is understood as 'the locus where society defines itself in a permanent attempt to invent the future by disentangling the old and the new' (Rosanvallón, 1992: 20; author's translation).



Note

1 See the symposium on 'Discourse analysis and political science', guest-edited by Terrell Carver, published in Autumn 2002 in *European Political Science* 2: 1.

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