

Critical Mass, Critical Acts, Critical Contexts:
Understanding the Substantive Representation of Women at the Regional Level in France

by
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INTRODUCTION

Since the turn of the millennium, French women have made exciting progress in the political sphere beginning with the passage of the gender parity law in 2000, which resulted in increased numbers of female officeholders and culminating in the first competitive female presidential candidate, the Socialist Ségolène Royal, in 2007. Nowhere is this progress more evident than in France's regional councils, where women are now about half of all councilors. In this paper, I compare two French regions, Nord-Pas de Calais (which lies along France's northern coast and shares a border with Belgium) and Alsace (which is located in the northeast and abuts Germany), to examine what happens when women are equal in number to men in elective assemblies. That is, I examine whether the growing number of female officeholders in these two regional councils has a particular impact on women's substantive representation in policy terms. I find that the number of women friendly policies increased as the numbers of female officeholders increased, but that these policies did not necessarily result from the sheer numbers of women. Instead, they were mainly attributable to the acts of individual politicians who made policy in a specific social and political context.

I focus on France because it was the first country to require gender parity, making it possible to determine the direct and indirect effects of such a reform over a relatively large period of time.¹ It is well-known that the passage of parity reform nearly a decade ago directly resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of French women holding seats in local and regional assemblies. Following the 2004 French regional elections, the first such elections held after the passage of parity, the percentage of female regional councilors almost doubled to 47 percent from an average of 27 percent six years before. This increase was not mirrored at the departmental (county) and national levels where women are less than a fifth of elective

assemblies; and although the number of female municipal councilors increased dramatically after the passage of the parity law, the immense number of municipal councils (approximately 36,000) precludes systematic study.²

However, the indirect effects of parity reform are still uncertain. In other words, it is still unclear whether the increased number of female politicians will mean a beneficial change for women in policy terms. My paper will attempt to clarify the indirect effects of parity reform by showing that an improvement in women's descriptive representation does not necessarily result in an improvement in women's substantive representation. That is, more female officeholders may not mean more women friendly policy. Thus, my study of the French regions will contribute to the more general theories gender and politics scholars already have about the (indirect) impact that gender quota laws have on women's substantive representation.

I chose Nord-Pas de Calais (NPDC) and Alsace because they are political opposites. NPDC has long been a stronghold for the Left. Since 1986, when the first direct regional-level elections were held, until today, a coalition of left-wing parties has controlled the council. Currently, this coalition enjoys a comfortable governing majority, holding about 65 percent of the council's 113 seats. In contrast, for more than 20 years, Alsace's 47 seat regional government has been run by a coalition of right-wing parties, and currently, it is the only region in France that is controlled by the Right.³ At the same time, both regions have experienced similar increases in the number of female officeholders. As Tables 1 and 2 make clear, the percentage of women in NPDC's regional council quadrupled between 1986 and 2004 while the Alsatian council witnessed an eightfold increase in female members over the past two decades. Thus, by comparing the two regions over time, I can determine whether political ideology or the

increasing numbers of female officeholders (or something else entirely) was the source of any women friendly policies.

Finally, I decided to conduct case studies of two French regions because such studies can yield valuable micro-level data about the actors and institutions involved in regional policy making in general and women friendly policy making in particular. Specifically, they provide insight into whether things like personal conviction and interpersonal relations impact the policy process. These insights can give researchers a nuanced understanding of the conditions under which women friendly policy is most likely to be made, an understanding that would be missed in a macro (or large-n) study.

I begin with a brief review of the literature on women's substantive representation and the small number of French studies that have broached the same subject. I then provide evidence gathered from process tracing and elite interviews to show that the number of women friendly policies in Nord-Pas de Calais and Alsace increased as the number of female councilors increased, but that these policies were primarily due to certain individuals who operated within a specific social and political context. I conclude with a brief summary of the paper's main findings and a discussion of the broader implications of my findings for the study of gender and politics.

THE MAKING OF WOMEN FRIENDLY POLICY

Studies of women and politics are usually divided into two categories. The first examine *descriptive* (i.e. numerical) representation or why so few women hold elective office. These studies attempt to identify the various cultural and institutional barriers that block women's entry into politics (e.g. Norris and Inglehart 2005). The second focuses on *substantive* representation or the idea that women have a distinct set of interests, and that female politicians are necessary to

translate these interests into policy (e.g. Phillips 1995). Defining these interests, however, has been a topic of debate among gender and politics scholars. Generally, women's interests have been defined broadly to include both traditional women's issue areas (e.g. childcare, healthcare, education) and feminist women's interests (e.g. reproductive rights, salary equity, equal political representation). While scholars caution against assuming that women's interests are the same across time and place (e.g. Beckwith and Cowell-Meyers 2007), it is still argued that women's interests remain gendered even though they may vary (e.g. Phillips 1995). More recently, scholars have challenged the existing definitions of women's interests and issues. Some argue that traditional or feminist definitions are based on preconceived notions of women's interests that are "oversimplified" and "essentialized" (Celis 2008). Others say that existing research on women's policy issues fails to acknowledge that some women organize around non-feminist or even anti-feminist goals (e.g. Beckwith and Cowell-Meyers 2007).

Despite the debate over the definition of women's interests and whether a common set of women's interests exists, gender and politics scholars have searched for empirical evidence that female representatives act decisively on the basis of these presumed interests. In other words, they want to know whether women are more likely to pursue women friendly policies than men. Some scholars have looked for evidence in tabulations of legislators' roll call votes (e.g. Swers 1998). While these studies find that women are more likely to vote for women's policy than men, the gender differences are not very significant. Other scholars have criticized roll call studies, arguing that such votes are not the best indicator of sex differences in policy making (e.g. Tamerius 1995). Instead of relying on roll call votes, these researchers have studied agenda setting and policy formation (e.g. bill sponsorship or introduction, bill co-sponsorship and

speechmaking), showing that women's voices are more likely to be heard and to have an impact on this part of the policy process (e.g. Bratton and Ray 2002; Swers and Larson 2005).

Most of the investigations into French women's political representation fall into the descriptive category (e.g. Bereni and Lépinard 2004; Murray 2004; Troupel 2006). Only a small number of studies have examined the substantive representation in policy terms of French women. At the national level, evidence is mixed. On the one hand, in-depth interviews with female officeholders revealed that a large majority had no intention of pursuing policies that would improve women's lives (Sineau 1988). On the other, more recent interviews with male and female members of the National Assembly showed that men and women on the Left were more likely than their counterparts on the Right to believe that women could modify the content of the political agenda, and that left-wing women were more likely to believe so than men representing the Left (Sineau 2001). Evidence is mixed at the local level as well. A study of women elected to the municipal council in Rennes, the capital of Brittany, revealed that the female councilors added women's rights items to the agenda (Junter-Loiseau 1998). At the same time, interviews with female mayors in rural municipalities and male and female town councilors suggested that the female officeholders did not favor women's issues over other kinds of issues (Lépinard 2006; Rieu 1998). Finally, a case study of Brittany's regional council revealed that its women friendly policies were mainly attributable to the critical acts of individual politicians (both male and female) operating within a distinct political context (Opello 2008).⁴

In addition to the works that examine whether women's substantive representation is advanced through policy making, there are studies that consider whether a specific number or *critical mass* of female politicians is necessary to make women friendly legislation. Generally, it is agreed that women must comprise between 15 and 30 percent of a legislature to constitute a

critical mass or the percentage necessary to successfully articulate policy priorities (e.g. Thomas 1994). Empirical studies, however, call into question the concept of critical mass by demonstrating that increased numbers of women in legislative bodies do not necessarily translate into better representation of women's interests (e.g. Carroll 2001; Reingold 2000; Weldon 2002), or that women could "make a difference" even if they did not constitute a critical mass (e.g. Bratton 2005). Instead, *critical acts* or "acts of empowerment" (that is, acts taken to mobilize the resources of the organization or institution to improve the situation for the minority group) were said to explain the advancement of women's substantive representation particularly when critical mass had not been obtained (Dahlerup 1988).

In light of this empirical evidence, gender and politics scholars tried to improve upon the theory of critical mass. These scholars argue that we should re-think the idea that a critical mass of women will automatically result in an increase in women's substantive representation in general and in women friendly policy in particular (e.g. "Critical Perspectives" 2006; Beckwith and Cowell-Meyers 2007). Instead, we should examine the ways in which internal and external political and social variables (i.e. electoral systems, political ideology, legislative norms and structures, social groups, public opinion, etc.) interact with sheer numbers of women to improve women's substantive representation. Such an examination, it is claimed, will establish "a threshold number" (i.e. the boundary between numbers of women too small to influence lawmaking and numbers large enough to produce pro-women policy) as well as "the conditions under which some large numbers of elected women could be translated into substantive representation of women" (Beckwith and Cowell-Meyers 2007, 553).

Given these calls to improve upon the notion of critical mass, I decided to conduct a comparative analysis of two French regions over a twenty year period to clarify how many

women and what political conditions are necessary to produce women friendly policy. Both NPDC and Alsace gradually achieved a critical mass of female officeholders (see Tables 1 and 2) while remaining on opposing ends of the political spectrum. By comparing these two cases, I can attempt to determine whether there is a “threshold number” of women necessary for creating policy that favors women and whether conditions like political ideology are influential in this policy making process.

Additionally, my regional-level analysis will improve our knowledge of women’s substantive representation in France because its method of studying the subject is more comprehensive than that employed in previous French studies. Most of these studies rely on interviews, and as a result, their conclusions are almost exclusively based on what legislators say they would (or would not) do for women in policy terms rather than on what kinds of policies were made (or not made) for women. In contrast, as discussed in the next section, I combine elite interviews with process tracing to determine whether female and male officeholders actually proposed pro-women policies as well as whether certain conditions contributed to the passage of their proposals.

RESEARCH DESIGN

To analyze the substantive representation of French women in policy terms, I examined two of the hypotheses generated by Karen Beckwith and Kimberly Cowell-Meyers (2007) to improve upon the concept of critical mass. The first hypothesis pertains to the political context. According to Beckwith and Cowell-Meyers, pro-women policy is more likely when left-wing parties control an elective assembly than when right-wing parties are the governing majority (557). If this hypothesis is true, then I should find evidence of a greater number of women

friendly policies in NPDC, where the Left has always controlled the regional council than in Alsace, a stronghold of the Right.

The second hypothesis deals with “sheer numbers” or the attempt to identify a magic number above which women’s substantive representation is most likely to occur. According to Beckwith and Cowell Meyers (2007), the “critical representation threshold” is 15 percent. Thus, if the percentage of women elected to an assembly is 15 percent or higher (especially when those women are elected by left-wing parties), then women’s substantive representation in policy terms will be more likely to occur than when it is below 15 percent (557). If this hypothesis is true, then I should find increased evidence of women friendly policy making in NPDC beginning in 1992, when women first composed 15 percent of the regional council and persisting throughout the 1990s and 2000s as the percentage of female councilors more than tripled. Similarly, I should find increased evidence of pro-women policy making in the Alsatian council after the 1998 regional elections, when women passed the “critical representation threshold” for the first time and following the 2004 electoral contest, when women won half the council seats.

To test these hypotheses, I engaged in process tracing and elite interviewing. In other words, I used archival material, historical secondary sources and elite interviews to determine “whether the causal process a theory hypothesizes or implies in a case is in fact evident in the sequence and values of the intervening variables in that case” (Tansey 2007). To trace the process of women friendly policy making in NPDC and Alsace, I spent three weeks each in the regional council archives where I examined primary and secondary sources that detailed the region’s policy making process from January 1986 until July 2008. Thus, I was thus able to tabulate the number of women friendly policies made by the two councils across time and to determine the source of these policies.

While previous studies of the substantive representation of women (especially those in America) investigated the agenda setting activities of individual legislators, this method is problematic for a study of regional councils in France because these councils function like parliaments (rather than like presidential systems). In France, it is the regional council's President, aided by a cabinet of vice-presidents and policy commissioners (instead of individual legislators), who sets the policy agenda and drafts the budget, which are then approved or rejected when the council meets in its tri-monthly plenary session. Moreover, given that the President leads the council's majority party (or coalition of parties), roll call votes do not provide an accurate measure of a councilor's preference since officeholders tend to vote along party lines (Lovenduski and Norris 2003) or to vote unanimously in favor of the executive's proposals. Thus, when tabulating women friendly policies, I focused on which members of the executive submitted the policy to the council for its approval.

In addition to my archival research, I conducted in-depth interviews in both regions. I spoke with a selection of male and female councilors representing a variety of political opinions; a sample of bureaucrats (hired either by the national government or the regional council) and with members of various women's groups.⁵ I selected respondents through a process of non-probability sampling known as snowball or chain-referral sampling. By using a non-probability sample, I ensured that I spoke with those individuals who were most involved in the making of pro-women policy in NPDC and Alsace (which would not have been possible if a random interview sample had been generated). In particular, the snowball method (where an initial set of interview respondents suggest a second set of potential respondents who in turn suggest a third set and so on) helped me to identify those individuals who were important players in the policy making process but who were not readily apparent upon my arrival in NPDC and Alsace. I asked

interview subjects a series of open-ended questions about the influence of the increased presence of women on the policy process and about the impact of several external organizations on the council's policies. These open-ended interviews served two purposes: additive and corroborative (Tansey 2007). On the one hand, the interviews provided new information about the thoughts key elites had concerning the influx of female councilors and their potential impact on the creation of women friendly policies. On the other, the interview data confirmed information that had already been collected from the regional council archives.

I defined women friendly policies as those that advanced women's status and equality, whether in traditional policy areas (e.g. education, healthcare, childcare) or explicitly feminist ones (e.g. reproductive rights, pay equity, etc.).⁶ Included in these policies were those said to be gender mainstreamed by the council. Gender mainstreaming is defined as "the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programs in all areas and at all levels" (Rai 2003, 16). Thus, I looked for evidence of the integration of gender equality into a variety of policy areas. So, for example, if regional budgetary lines included regulations or targets to achieve gender equality, then they were counted as gender mainstreamed.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Different Regions, Similar Policy Content

Despite their geographic and political differences, the content of the women friendly policies in NPDC and Alsace was strikingly similar. In both regions, pro-women policies primarily sought to advance women's job training and placement. At the same time, some policy making differences did emerge. For example, the NPDC was more likely to fund women's groups while Alsace was more likely to subsidize its women friendly policies with European

Social Funds. However, as this section will show, the women friendly policies of both regions focused on improving women's access to employment.

Nord-Pas de Calais

As Table 1 shows, the vast majority of women friendly policies in NPDC consisted of decisions to fund women's groups. Between 1986 and 1992, all but one of the council's pro-women policies was to fund these groups. One group in particular, the Regional Center for Women's Information and Training (*Collectif Régional pour l'Information et la Formation des Femmes* or CORIF), received almost all of the funds, which were allocated at regular intervals to pay for the Center's operating costs and its scholarship program for girls interested in pursuing scientific and/or technical studies. Similarly, CORIF was the subject of just under half (43 percent) of the council's funding decisions from 1992 until 1998. The remaining funding decisions pertained to eight other women's groups, which received funds for their programs to promote women rights in general, and the rights of immigrant women, unemployed women and former female inmates in particular.

As during previous administrations, a vast majority (88 percent) of the pro-women policies made in NPDC between 1998 and 2004 were decisions to fund women's groups. However, CORIF was not as heavily subsidized as in previous years. Instead, one quarter of funding decisions involved the Center for Information on Women's Rights (*Centre d'Information des Droits des Femmes* or CIDF), which, beginning in 1999, displaced CORIF as the primary locale for the generation and distribution of women's rights information and programming. CORIF, however, did not disappear. It continued to receive money for its scholarship program, and it was given capital to run job training programs for women. At the same time, over a dozen other women's associations were bankrolled by the council for their women's rights activities

(although none experienced the kind of support that CIDF did). As under previous administrations, the bulk of women friendly policy (nearly 80 percent) made by the current council (2004-2010) consists of decisions to fund women's groups, and CIDF continues to receive most of the money: 30 percent of funding decisions pertain to the staffing, operating and programming costs of CIDF offices located throughout the region. Again almost a dozen other women's groups also received monies, including CORIF, which received resources for its job training program. However, none of these associations was funded to the same degree as CIDF.⁷

In addition to the decisions to fund women's groups, there were a small number of women friendly policies that were folded into broader policy proposals. As Table 1 reveals, these kinds of women friendly policies were rare during the first two administrations with only one such measure adopted between 1986 and 1998. As directed by the State-Region Contract Plan (or CPER) that covered the late 1980s, the NPDC council granted about \$100,000 to various job training organizations that offered programs catering to women (CR NPDC 1986, no. 29).⁸

By 1998, however, the number of broader policies that included women friendly measures began to increase (see Table 1). Half of these policies were sponsored by the region alone while the other half was sponsored by the region and some other entity (usually the State). Most of the policies in the region-only category (75 percent) consisted of broad-based job training and job placement agreements that included provisions for women. For example, the Permanent Commission⁹ adopted a job training agreement, which included the requirement that young girls be trained for jobs traditionally held by men (CR NPDC 2000, no. 153); it agreed to fund the Regional Job Training Program that included a pledge to favor women's access to job training programs for potential business owners (CR NPDC 2003, no. 180), a pledge that was renewed a year later (CR NPDC 2004, no. 190); it adopted a set of regulations regarding the distribution of

regional funds to area businesses, which included the stipulation that employers receiving regional aid must promise to fight against discrimination in general and gender discrimination in particular by increasing their numbers of young female apprentices (CR NPDC 2006, no. 206); and it later updated these regulations by providing employers with bonus payments if they showed evidence of fighting against discrimination in the work place. (So, for example, the region would pay an employer a 200 Euro bonus if it hired a woman for a job that traditionally went to a man) (CR NPDC 2007, no. 212).

The remaining region-only measures (25 percent) were part of the NPDC budget. In 2005, the first year the budget included specific references to women, the line for job training included a provision to finance CORIF and its women-specific job training projects. Similarly, the 2005 and 2006 budgetary line for “citizenship and solidarity” (i.e. the line that funds the region’s “associative partners” which serve “to inform the public and promote public expression”) singled out the CIDF for its projects to increase women’s “value and autonomy” in the public and private spheres by providing them with information about their rights, which, according to the council, was essential for full citizenship (CR NPDC 2004, no. 193; CR NPDC 2005, no. 203).

In addition to the measures that originated in the regional council, there were a set of broad-based measures with women friendly provisions that came out of collaborations between the region, the State and (sometimes) a third party. About half of these measures had to do with the implementation and/or evaluation of the State-Region Contract Plan. For example, in order to implement the State-Region Contract Plan for 2000-2006, the Permanent Commission authorized the council President to join representatives of the State (i.e. the Prefect and the Regional Women’s Rights Delegate) in signing a protocol on “Inequalities relating to job placement,”

which outlined a dual approach toward gender equality in job training and placement in NPDC: the introduction of women-specific job training measures *and* the broader integration of gender equality objectives into job training programs and institutions throughout the region (CR NPDC 2001, no. 155).¹⁰ Similarly, the Permanent Commission adopted a protocol for implementing the part of the 2000-2006 State-Region Contract Plan concerning apprentices. Citing the fight against discrimination being waged by Nicole Péry (the Socialist Deputy Minister for Women's Rights and Job Training from 1998 until 2002), the protocol included measures to help those apprentices especially susceptible to discrimination (like women and people of foreign origin) get long-term employment (CR NPDC 2001, no. 157). Finally, the Permanent Commission approved an agreement on the implementation of the State-Region Contract Plan for 2000-2006, which included several women friendly propositions such as a gender equal job training policy, a gender equal approach to "citizenship and solidarity" (i.e. the public's access to information and its right of expression), and equal access of boys and girls to educational, cultural and sports programs (CR NPDC 2001, no. 157).¹¹

In addition to the women friendly provisions found in the State-Region Contract Plan (and its follow up protocols), the regional council's Permanent Commission made agreements with various third parties that included clauses beneficial to women. It made a deal with the NPDC Chamber of Artisans to develop job training programs for artisans over a three year period (2003-2006), especially those that favored the feminization of artisanal jobs in the region (CR NPDC 2003, no. 179; CR NPDC 2004, no. 184); it signed an agreement with the State and the Regional Association of Local Job Training Organizations to create sustainable employment for young people in difficulty and included a pledge to favor equal chances between men and women (CR NPDC 2006, no. 207); it joined the State and metalworkers in a pact to create more

job training programs in the metalworking field, particularly those that favored women (CR NPDC 2007, no. 212); it, along with the State and the National Automotive Association, agreed to more automotive job training programs in general and those that catered to women in particular (CR NPDC 2008, no. 218); and, finally, it joined the National Association for Adult Job Training (*Association Nationale pour la Formation Professionnelle des Adultes* or AFPA) to reduce inequalities in the access to job training programs, especially among those groups suffering from high rates of unemployment like women, seniors, the disabled and those without high school diplomas (CR NPDC 2008, no. 218).

Alsace

Women friendly policies in Alsace fall into three categories: decisions pertaining to the Regional Fund for Women's Job Training (*Fonds Régional d'Incitation à la Formation des Femmes* or FRIFF), policies that are specifically women friendly and (as in NPDC) broader policies that include women friendly measures (see Table 2). Between 1986 and 1992, when FRIFF had yet to be established, the Permanent Commission adopted two specifically women friendly measures: it agreed to help fund a secretarial internship program for women run by the Chamber of Commerce in Mulhouse, a mid-sized city in Alsace (CRA, 3 March 1988), and it decided to co-finance (with the State) a study on women's employment levels in the region (CRA 4 May 1990). The regional council also made broader policies that included pro-women planks. For example, it signed the State-Region Contract plan for 1989-1993 that included an extensive job training program, part of which sought to "re-qualify" women for certain professions (CRA 20 January 1989), and it co-financed (along with the State and the Association for Employment in Industry and Commerce or ASSEDIC) a job re-training program for individuals (especially women) who had been laid off or downsized (CRA 5 October 1990). All

of these policies pertained in some way to furthering women's employment opportunities in the region and almost all resulted from collaborations between the regional council, the State and (often) a third party.

Under the next administration (1992-1998), the regional council established and renewed the FRIFF program, which had the twin goals of (1) helping needy women enroll in job training programs by paying for their childcare and/or eldercare expenses and (2) diversifying women's employment choices (namely through scholarships for female high school graduates with plans to pursue a higher degree in science or technology) (CRA 23 December 1994; CRA 1 March 1996). The regional council also continued to make policies that were specifically women friendly. For example, the Permanent Commission agreed to work with the State (namely the Regional Women's Rights Delegate) and the Director of Work and Employment in Haut-Rhin (a department of Alsace) to create job training program for 30 women in the industrial sector (CRA 12 March 1993); it joined the State (i.e. Regional Delegate for Women's Rights) in funding a job training program for female electricians in Strasbourg, the region's capital (CRA 27 February 1995); and using regional monies, European Social Funds (*Fonds Social Européen* or FSE) and grants from AGEOS- PME (the biggest private provider of job training funds for small and mid-sized businesses in France), it paid for a job training program geared primarily to women seeking employment as accountants and administrative assistants in small businesses (CRA 6 March 1998).

At the same time, this administration (1992-1998) passed broader policies that included women friendly measures. For example, the Permanent Commission agreed to help pay for a job re-training program for laid off or downsized workers, especially since it pledged to "diversify" women's employment (CRA 12 March 1993); it authorized the council's President to sign an

agreement with the State to renew an apprenticeship program that was eligible for European Social Funds (FSE) because it included the goal of increasing women's access to jobs traditionally held by men (CRA 2 June 1995); it adopted a budget in 1997 for "education, job training and apprenticeships" that included funds for improving women's access to job training programs (CRA 13-14 January 1997); and it agreed to replicate a broad-based job training program already taking place in Greece and Italy, which included the FSE friendly goal of increasing the qualifications of women working in the home healthcare field by helping them prepare for an aptitude exam (CRA 5 September 1997). In sum, while nearly all of these policies were aimed at helping women find employment (through gender equal job training and job placement services), half were the product of collaborations between the region, the State and/or a third party while the other half were the work of the region alone.

Between 1998 and 2004, the number of FRIFF decisions increased dramatically, composing just over half of all women friendly laws made during this administration (see, e.g., CRA 5 February 1999; CRA 16-17 December 1999; CRA 14-15 December 2000; CRA 2 February 2001; CRA 12-13 December 2002; CRA 11-12 December 2003) while the number of specifically pro-women policies and broader policies with women specific measures represented about one-quarter and one-sixth of these laws respectively. The women-specific policies can be subdivided into three equal groups. First, there were policies that sought to raise awareness about women's employment opportunities in the region as when the Permanent Commission approved financing for regional conferences on women's employment and job training programs (CRA 7 May 1999; CRA 6 July 2001) or when it agreed to pay for a set of informational events on women's employment and job training to mark International Women's Day (CRA 3 March 2000 CRA 2 February 2001). Second, there were decisions to fund regional prizes (awarded by the

Regional Women's Rights Delegate) for the "diversification of apprenticeships for young girls" and for girls pursuing scientific and technical studies (CRA 3 December 1999; CRA 7 December 2001). Finally, there were measures to co-finance job training programs for women. For example, the regional council helped finance job training programs for women seeking employment as truck drivers (CRA 2 February 2001), home healthcare aides (CRA 6 October 2000), tour bus drivers (CRA 9 November 2001), jewelry manufacturers (CRA 9 November 2001), and makers of pre-prepared foods (CRA 13 September 2002). The regional council also approved job training programs that targeted specific groups of women such as those recently laid off from the textile industry (CRA 7 July 2000) and those in need (CRA 11 July 2003).

In addition, the Alsatian regional council of 1998-2004 adopted broader policies that included pro-women measures. For example, the Permanent Commission agreed to help regional job training organizations enrich their programs for young people so long as they (among other things) tried to achieve gender equality (CRA 5 November 1999, CRA 6 December 2002); it adopted an annual program for job seekers, which emphasized the importance of helping women find jobs, especially those typically had by men (CRA 8 December 2000, CRA 8 February 2002, CRA 6 December 2002, CRA 11 July 2003); it signed a contract with the transportation industry that included a pledge to help women enter this field (CRA 7 December 2001); it approved of a job training program for individuals re-entering the workforce that included women as a target audience (CRA 12 July 2002, CRA 14 November 2003); and it adopted a multi-year agreement with AGEFOS PME to fund job training programs for women who had been out of the workforce for a lengthy period of time (CRA 12 September 2003). As with the creation of policies that were specifically women friendly, the regional council worked with various entities (such as the State, municipal and departmental governments, public and private job training

institutions, and relevant industry representatives) to finance these broader measures. It also used European Social Funds to pay for them, frequently emphasizing that the inclusion of gender equality goals within broader policies made them eligible for EU aid.

The current Alsatian regional council has continued the women friendly policy making trends established by its predecessor. As Table 2 reveals, FRIFF decisions account for half of all women friendly policy measures between 2004 and 2008 with women specific policies and broader policies with women specific measures each representing about one quarter of pro-women policies. As under the previous administrations, the women specific measures typically involved funding job training programs for women, especially in fields traditionally dominated by men. For example, the Permanent Commission agreed to co-finance two job training programs for women in the industrial sector (CRA 7 February 2005, CRA 4 February 2005); one for women seeking employment in the pre-prepared foods industry (CRA 3 June 2005); one for future female truck drivers (CRA 10 March 2006); and one for women in the construction industry (CRA 7 April 2006). It also agreed to co-finance job training programs that targeted specific groups like immigrant women or needy women (CRA 12 September 2007; CRA 10 December 2004).

Finally, the council unveiled the Equal Opportunities--Horizon 2007 Program (*Egalité des Chances Horizons 2007*), also known as the ECHO program, which was one of 45 projects selected for funding by the High Authority for the Fight Against Discriminations and for Equality (or HALDE).¹² In light of the evidence that women are persistently poorly represented in certain professions in Alsace, the ECHO program was designed to fund projects that raised awareness in the region about ways women can be better integrated in the workplace, especially in those sectors that are traditionally dominated by men. ECHO projects are overseen by the

Regional Council in partnership with the Regional Delegate for Women's Rights and are eligible for European Social Funds, especially if their goals are in keeping with the 2007 EU initiative, "European Year for Equal Chances for Everyone". In 2007, the Regional Council selected three projects for ECHO financing: (1) a series of events in the Haut Rhin to promote women in construction jobs; (2) a stage show for high schools students created by a women's group (*SOS Femmes Solidarités*) that explores gender stereotypes; and (3) a series of day-long events about the experiences of women working in jobs considered to be traditionally masculine (CRA 1 June 2007; CRA 3 December 2007).

In addition to these specifically women friendly measures, the regional council adopted broad initiatives that included pro-women planks. For example, it continued its annual program for job seekers, emphasizing that since the program received European Social funds, it must include specific actions to help women gain access to the workplace and to find jobs in sectors traditionally dominated by men (CRA 11 June 2004; CRA 10 December 2004; CRA 2 December 2005; CRA 9 November 2007); it continued its multi-year agreement with AGEFOS PME, in which the two institutions (along with the EU) agreed to fund job training programs for individuals, (e.g. women) who had been out of the workforce for a lengthy period of time (CRA 10 December 2004; CRA 12 May 2006; CRA 5 January 2007; CRA 9 November 2007); it drew on European Social Funds to finance a personalized short-term job training program in technology, which was targeted in part to women (especially mothers) preparing to re-enter the workplace after a hiatus (CRA 11 June 2004; CRA 13 June 2008); and it adopted an awareness-raising program, which included several measures for girls and women like the production of a DVD questioning gender stereotypes in the workplace; the publication of a brochure on women's status in Alsace; and the promotion of events organized by the Center for Information on

Women's Rights (CIDF) to raise awareness about gender equality in Alsace (CRA 6 October 2006).

As in previous years, the current regional council's women friendly laws were focused on job training and job placement and the council partnered with other entities to finance them. For example, the council collaborated with the State (through the Regional Delegate for Women's Rights), municipal and departmental governments, public and private job training institutions, and the relevant businesses and industries to sponsor and pay for both the women specific policies as well as broader measures that included women friendly planks. It also often drew on European Social Funds to pay for women-specific job training programs as they were keeping with the European Union's goal of creating equal opportunities between men and women.

In sum, both the regional councils of NPDC and Alsace worked either alone or with various partners to pass policies that were friendly to women, most of which pertained to job training and/or job placement (i.e. conscious raising events, regional prizes, employment programs). At the same time, two differences between the regions are also evident. First, the NPDC council was alone in its consistent funding of women's groups, some of which had distinct women's rights agendas unrelated to job training or placement. The source for this funding was eventually streamlined into a policy commission called Citizenship and Solidarity, whose goal was to create an informed citizenry inclined toward public participation through the funding of groups and organizations (referred to as "associative partners") in the region.¹³ In contrast, such a commission does not exist in Alsace (perhaps because there is no political will among the region's conservative politicians to create one) and thus there is little evidence of council-backed women's groups. Second, the Alsatian council relied heavily on European Social

Funds to pay for its women friendly policies. In contrast, the NPDC was less likely to draw upon European monies to pay for its pro-women initiatives.

This evidence raises the following question: Why did most of the women friendly policies made by the councils of NPDC and Alsace pertain to job training and/or placement despite the fact that the councils were controlled by opposing political parties and why did these policies experience an uptick after the 1998 regional elections? In the analysis section, I will argue that we can better understand the similarities (and small differences) in the content of women friendly policy in Alsace and NPDC once the policy makers and the policy making context are fully defined.

A “Critical Representation Threshold” of 25 to 30 Percent

As Tables 1 and 2 make clear, the number of women friendly policies increased in both Nord-Pas de Calais and Alsace as the number of female officeholders increased. In NPDC, only nine pro-women policies were made between 1986 and 1992, when women were just 12 percent of the regional council. However, when women became 15 percent of councilors in 1992, the number of women friendly policies increased threefold, and this dramatic increase in pro-women policy persisted as the number of women councilors continued to climb. Pro-women policies more than doubled when women became a third of the regional council in 1998, and I predict that their number will not decrease now that women hold half of all NPDC council seats. Given that (on average) about 12 pro-women policies were made per year by the NPDC council between April 2004 and June 2008 (for a total of 49 policies), I project that just under 70 policies will be passed by the time the current administration comes to an end in April 2010. If this turns out to be the case, then there is strong evidence that the “critical representation threshold” is about 15 percent: When women composed 15 percent of the NPDC council, the number of

women friendly policies increased sharply. At the same time, I would argue that it is more accurate to place the “threshold” at 30 percent because it was not until this percentage was obtained in 1998 that the council began to make women friendly policies that extended beyond the funding of women’s groups. Moreover, the substantive representation of women in policy terms is not projected to increase any further despite the fact women have far surpassed any type of representation threshold.

A similar trend is apparent in the Alsatian council. Between 1986 and 1992, when women held a mere six percent of regional council seats, only five women friendly policies were passed. While the number of women friendly policies more than doubled between 1992 and 1998, when women were eleven percent of councilors (see Table 2), it was not until women surpassed the “critical representation threshold” of 15 percent, that the number of pro-women policies increased dramatically: There was a fivefold increase (to 71) when women held just under one-quarter of council seats. I predict that the substantive representation of women in policy terms is not likely to decrease now that women are almost half of the regional council. Given that (on average) about 13 pro-women policies were made per year by the Alsatian council between April 2004 and June 2008 (for a total of 57 policies), I project that there will be a slight uptick in the number of such policies (to just over 80) by the time new elections are held in March 2010. If this turns out to be the case, then there will be strong evidence to suggest that the “critical representation threshold” is about 25 percent: While the number of women friendly policies increased sharply when women composed about a quarter of the Alsatian council, the substantive representation of women in policy terms is not expected to increase as dramatically under the current administration (despite the fact that women are nearly half of all councilors).

This evidence confirms the hypothesis presented by Beckwith and Cowell-Meyers (2007) that women's substantive representation in policy terms is more likely to occur when the percentage of women elected to an assembly is 15 percent or higher. However, it also suggests that 15 percent is not necessarily the magic number above which women's policy is most likely to be made. Given that pro-women policies increased dramatically when women were one third and one quarter of the councils in NPDC and Alsace respectively, the "critical representation threshold" for women's substantive representation in policy terms is 25 or 30 percent in this case.

At the same time, if we recall the regional policy making process in France, we are faced with the following puzzle: If (as mentioned above) regional council policy is essentially made by the executive (i.e. the council President, the Vice Presidents and, to a lesser extent, other members of the Permanent Commission) in its monthly meetings and is approved by a party-line vote or an unanimous vote in the council's semi-annual plenary meetings, then the sheer number of female councilors should not matter as much as the composition and the decisions of the executive. At the same time, the number and variety of pro-women policies sharply increased once the critical threshold of 25 to 30 percent was achieved after the 1998 elections. In the analysis section, I will try to solve this puzzle by discussing the role played by critical actors in the executive as well as the social and political context in which their decisions were made.

The Number of Women Friendly Policies Increased Despite the Political Party in Power

As Tables 1 and 2 make clear, the regional councils of NPDC and Alsace passed an increasing number of women friendly policies despite the fact that the former is controlled by the Left and the latter by the Right. In fact, once the "critical representation threshold" was achieved in 1998, there were slightly more pro-women policies made in conservative Alsace than in the

left-wing NPDC. This evidence contradicts the Beckwith and Cowell-Meyers (2007) hypothesis presented at the outset of this paper that pro-women policy is more likely when left-wing parties control an elective assembly than when right-wing parties are the governing majority. If this hypothesis was true, then I should have found evidence of a greater number of women friendly policies in NPDC where the Left has always controlled the regional council than in Alsace, a stronghold of the Right. Instead, the councils made similar numbers of women friendly policies regardless of political ideology. So, if the pro-women policies made in NPDC and Alsace are not due to political ideology, and if they are not necessarily due to the sheer numbers of women in the regional council (because of the parliamentary way in which policy is made), then what best explains the rise in women friendly policy in both councils across time? As I will argue in the analysis section, two factors explain why two politically dissimilar regions could experience similar increases in pro-women policies (especially since 1998): critical actors in the executive and the bureaucracy and a distinctive social and political policy making context.

ANALYSIS

Critical Actors Matter

Presidents and Vice Presidents

To understand why Alsace and NPDC passed women friendly policies that increased steadily over time, despite their political differences, we must examine the regional-level policy making process in greater detail. As mentioned above, policy is primarily created by the Permanent Commission, which is composed of the regional President, the regional Vice Presidents (who are named by the President and given a specific policy portfolio) and a selection of members from the governing and opposition parties. The Permanent Commission meets on a monthly basis to make policy decisions when the regional council is not in session and regularly consults one of a

dozen policy commissions, which are charged with rendering opinions on the policy proposals pertaining to them. Voting to approve or reject a particular policy is either unanimous or along party lines. Thus, those councilors not included in the Permanent Commission are for the most part excluded from the policy making process.

Within the Permanent Commission, the President plays the most significant role in the policy making process. S/he has the last word on what policies will be voted on either by the Permanent Commission or by the regional council in its plenary session. So, if a regional council's President advocates the advancement of women's rights, even going so far as to appoint a Vice President in charge of gender equality, it is likely that pro-women policy will be created during his or her tenure (see Opello 2008). At the same time, a regional council President can be sympathetic to the passage of women friendly policy even if s/he does not actively advocate for such policies. Interviews with the Presidents of the regional councils in NPDC and Alsace revealed this to be the case in both regions. Daniel Percheron, the President of NPDC since 2001, admitted that his region did not have a specific gender equality program or a public commitment to gender mainstreaming. However, he argued that the "women's question" was not a policy making priority in his region not because the region is indifferent to gender inequalities but because the NPDC faces a set of "urgent and painful social and economic problems" created by the closing of the region's mainstay industries and the resulting rise in unemployment rates. According to President Percheron, these problems must be solved before the region can adopt a women specific policy agenda. In the meantime, President Percheron said his executive "implicitly" supported approaches like gender mainstreaming and sought "implicitly equilibrated" policies for the region. He also expressed satisfaction at the large numbers of women who had recently

been elected to the regional council, saying they had changed the “weight in the assembly”, turning the council into a place that was less “egotistical” and (again) more equilibrated.

Similarly, Adrien Zeller, President of the Alsatian regional council for the past 12 years, told me that unemployment was the council’s main concern and that most of its attention was focused on job creation. Thus, equality policy was a “secondary” concern and as a result, Alsace had adopted neither a specifically women friendly policy program nor a gender mainstreaming approach toward policy making. At the same time President Zeller emphasized that when it came to crafting a regional employment policy, one of his main priorities was helping women reconcile their professional and private lives, which was reflected in the region’s support of women friendly “*incitations* or incentives”, like the Regional Fund for Women’s Job Training (FRIFF).

After the President, the regional Vice Presidents are major sources of policy initiatives. While Presidents Zeller and Percheron did not name a Vice President for gender equality (as was the case in Brittany; see Opello 2008), they did make other types of vice presidential appointments that ultimately served to further women’s interests. In NPDC, there exists a Vice President for International Relations, Associative Partners and Economic Solidarity (along with a corresponding policy commission),¹⁴ which uses its “citizenship and solidarity” budget line to support the region’s associative partners (i.e. organizations that provide public information and promote public expression). This Vice Presidency has targeted women’s groups for funding because they want to increase women’s status throughout the region by providing women with information about their rights and helping them achieve full citizenship. Currently, this Vice President is Ginette Verbrugge who has given particular attention to advancing gender equality

in the region, especially as it pertains to social and economic development

(www.calenda.revues.org) .

In Alsace, the Vice President for Job Training (along with the policy commission of the same name) has served as the primary supporter of women friendly initiatives, which is not surprising given President Zeller's stated focus on improving the region's employment rates. The current Vice President for Job Training is Martine Calderoli-Lotz, who is known for her commitment to improving women's employment rates through gender equal job training and job placement programs. For example, when attending a conference on increasing the number of women working in the industrial sector, she voiced her desire to "[end] prejudice" and "open industry's doors to women and girls" (www.martine-calderoli.fr).

Regional and National Bureaucrats

The members of the regional council's executive are assisted in their work by a large bureaucracy that is charged with preparing policy proposals for councilors' consideration and implementing the proposals once they become policy. In the NPDC, I spoke with the bureaucrat who worked for the Vice President for International Relations, Associative Partners and Economic Solidarity. In her view, the region's bureaucracy consistently supported women's groups and helped them promote gender equality in the region. At the same time, she recognized that this support often took the form of conscious raising events and information gathering rather than distinctive policy proposals. However, she warned against underestimating the value of such activities, stating that previous studies on needy women and gender-based discrimination had provided a point of departure for discussion and debate within the regional council. This opinion was echoed in an interview I conducted with a female bureaucrat who worked for the Vice President of Job Training. In her view, the creation of a "citizenship and solidarity" portfolio in

NPDC had led to improved relationships with women's groups in the region and heightened public and political awareness about persistent gender inequalities in NPDC.

Similarly, the Alsatian bureaucrat in charge of preparing and implementing education and job training policy acknowledged in an interview that even if her region did not have a policy program specific to women or a public commitment to gender mainstreaming, the councilors in general, and President Zeller in particular did have a "social conviction" that gender equality is a worthwhile goal and were willing to take steps (albeit small ones) to work toward this goal. Thus, in her view, it was possible for the bureaucracy to convince elected officials of the benefits of creating regional measures to improve women's status (i.e. prizes for girls pursuing careers typically dominated by men, annual day-long conferences devoted to raising awareness about women's status in the workplace, childcare subsidies for women returning to work after a hiatus, etc.)

In addition to the regional-level bureaucracy, there are State bureaucrats who are appointed to the regions and work with them in carrying out the wishes of the State. In some regions, these bureaucrats, namely the Prefect and the Regional Women's Rights Delegate (DRDF) are dedicated to improving the status of women within the region (Opello 2008). However, a large majority of interview respondents stated that the DRDF in NPDC and Alsace were powerless to change policy. When asked whether the DRDF could pressure the council into passing women friendly policy, all Alsatian councilors I interviewed for this study responded negatively and a large majority (66 percent) of councilors in NPDC said no. When asked why, I was frequently told that the Prefect in general and the DRDF in particular did not have "the means or the money" to impact the regional council's policy making process. While I was denied an interview by the DRDF in NPDC, I did speak with her counterpart in Alsace who

acknowledged that her office had “no power” over the regional council. Instead, she said she and her colleagues worked as an “institutional partner” with the appropriate Vice President (namely the VP for Job Training) to implement existing programs (e.g. the FRIFF program and the prizes for female students). She also said her office frequently served on steering and selection committees for regional projects pertaining to women. This evidence suggests that while the national bureaucrats did not play a critical role in the making of pro-women policy in Alsace and NPDC, those at the regional level were able to raise awareness among regional councilors about the problems associated with persistent gender inequalities and successfully persuade those officeholders to work toward finding a solution.

The Social and Political Context Matters

Increased Knowledge of Sex-Based Inequalities

As Amy Mazur (2005) has pointed out, knowledge of sex-based inequalities, especially those that exist at the national level, has spread in France since the 1980s, when the French national statistics office (INSEE) first began working with state agencies to publish data comparing men’s and women’s status in France. By the late 1990s, “sophisticated analytical instruments” had been created and were being used to help policy makers “measure the complex causes of gender-based inequalities,” measurements that were later widely publicized in France (215). The knowledge of sex-based inequities has also spread at the regional level with the publication of a series of books examining women’s status in each French region. The regional council in NPDC partnered with the State (namely the Regional Women’s Rights Delegate and the national statistics office), regional women’s groups (primarily the Regional Parity Observatory) and the European Union (specifically European Social Funds) to publish *Femmes en Nord/Pas-de-Calais: Regards sur la Parité* in 2006, which provided information on the status

of the region's women in terms of demography (e.g. age grades, marriage and divorce rates, birth rates, etc.), education and job training (e.g. graduation rates, job placement rates), employment (e.g. unemployment rates among women by job sector), living conditions (e.g. domestic violence rates, information on access to daycare, political life, cultural and sports programs, etc.) and healthcare (e.g. life expectancies and cancer rates among women as well as information on access to contraception and abortion).

Similarly, the Alsatian regional council worked with the State (namely the Regional Women's Rights Delegate, the regional branch of the national statistics office, and the Regional Director of Work, Employment and Job Training in Alsace) and regional women's groups (primarily the Center for Information on Women's Rights and Families or CIDFF) to publish *Les Femmes en Alsace* in early 2007. Like the volume published in NPDC, the Alsatian book provided information on women's social, political and economic status in the region. The goal of these two texts was to raise public awareness about the gender inequities that persisted in each region. It was also hoped that such conscious-raising would eventually translate into gender equality policies. In other words, once politicians had precise information about the challenges still confronting women, it was thought that they would be inspired to act on their behalf. Given that the books were published in 2006 and 2007 and that pro-women policies are on track to increase in both NPDC and Alsace during the current administration (2004-2010), it is possible that the ultimate goal of these books may be realized.

Women's Groups

During the mid to late 1990s, women's groups in France gained new momentum as newly created groups as well as groups that dated to the 1970s united around specific issues and mobilized to support specific policy reforms (Mazur 2005). At the regional level, however,

women's groups, especially those in Alsace and NPDC, did not seem to have the same kind of policy impact as those at the national level. As previously mentioned, the NPDC regional council funded a variety of women's groups, especially two groups that were particularly well known in the region: the Regional Center for Women's Information and Training (CORIF) and the Center for Information on Women's Rights (CIDF). However, there is no archival evidence to suggest that either of these organizations successfully pressured the council to make pro-women policy. Similarly, the Regional Parity Observatory, the third most easily recognizable women's group in NPDC did not lobby for feminist policy outcomes.¹⁵ Instead, the women's groups in NPDC focused their efforts on raising public awareness about women's rights issues and providing services for specific groups of women (i.e. former prison inmates, prostitutes, immigrants, those in need, those in abusive relationships, etc.).

This finding is echoed in interviews with elected officials and women's group members in NPDC. An overwhelming majority of elected officials (86 percent) and all women's group members responded negatively when I asked whether regional women's organizations were capable of pressuring the regional council into making women friendly policy. In the words of one female regional councilor, "Women's groups [in NPDC] can fight for the rights of certain groups of women, like prostitutes or victims of domestic violence, but they don't act as a lobby [to change regional policy] because they are much weaker today than in the 1970s, and they have too much individual autonomy." Or as a member of the Regional Parity Observatory put it, "The region's women's groups don't work as a lobby [to press for pro-women policy] because they can't. They do not work together and are incapable of creating the networks necessary to pressure the regional council to make women friendly policies."

I found a similar situation in Alsace, where women's groups were relatively unknown and did not receive the regional council funding that their counterparts did in the NPDC. I found no archival evidence to suggest that women's groups pressured the regional council into making women friendly policies, and when I asked elected officials whether women's organizations were capable of successfully lobbying the council for pro-women policies, all responded negatively. In the words of one female elected official, "Women's groups [in Alsace] are conformist. They are neither courageous nor dynamic. They are not a lobby and [agitating for women's rights] is not a priority, [especially when] women don't have adequate childcare." Similarly, the head of a now defunct women's group said that currently such groups, "have few means and aging members" with little hope of attracting new members as today's young women "don't see the sense in joining."

It is worth mentioning, however, that in the early 1990s, 20 conservative middle class women came together to protest the fact that right-wing parties refused to nominate female candidates by creating a political group of their own, *Femmes d'Alsace*. This group presented a slate of women candidates during the 1992 and 1998 regional elections, winning one seat in 1992 and two seats six years later. There was no archival evidence to suggest that the three *Femmes d'Alsace* councilors actively fought for pro-women policies, and interview data when echoed this finding. When I asked Sylvie Freysz (a member of the regional council from 1998 until 2004 representing *Femmes d'Alsace*) whether she tried to make women friendly policies, she said "I did what I could for women, especially by working with the Vice Presidents in charge of education and job training;" but most of her efforts were limited to raising awareness among members about gender equalities rather than pushing through a women friendly policy program. Madame Freysz also pointed out that it was the regional council President who had the last word

on policy making, and she said that while he respected women, he certainly was not a feminist. Moreover, a female councilor who served at the same time as Madame Freysz said during an interview that *Femmes d'Alsace* councilors adopted positions that were “correct” or “easily accepted by others in the council” but that these positions were not necessarily feminist.

In 2001, the women-only *Femmes d'Alsace* was weakened when several members broke away to form *Ensemble pour la parité*, an organization that welcomed male members, whom it felt where necessary for the creation of a gender equal society. Today, both groups are dormant, especially since the 2000 gender parity law succeeded in accomplishing their main goal: increasing the number of female candidates running in municipal and regional elections. The evidence presented in this section suggests that women’s groups in Alsace and NPDC did not have much of an impact on either region’s policy making process and, therefore, do not provide a convincing explanation for why both councils made pro-women decisions. As the next section will show, the national and international political contexts offer a better story for why NPDC and Alsace steadily increased the number of policies that benefited women.

Pro-Women Policy Making at the National and International Levels

In 1997, a coalition of left-wing parties took control of the French National Assembly (i.e. the lower house of parliament) and the new Socialist Prime Minister, Lionel Jospin, named Nicole Péry the Deputy Minister for Women’s Rights and Job Training. While Péry lacked an independent budget and could not attend cabinet meetings on a regular basis, she did play an important role in backing women friendly policies and gathering as well as distributing information. One such policy, the 2001 Génisson Law, toughened existing requirements that businesses provide annual reports on men and women’s status so that future plans could be made

to achieve gender equality and required (for the first time) gender equality in the civil service (Mazur 2005).

When the Right regained control over parliament following the 2002 elections, the new Gaullist Prime Minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, named Nicole Ameline the Delegate Minister for Parity and Equal Employment, a post which was upgraded to full cabinet status following a cabinet shuffle in 2004. As Parity Minister, Ameline placed significant attention on educating business leaders about sexual inequalities in the workplace, developing a new equality “label” firms could adopt, introducing an equal pay law, and pushing the Equality Charter (*Chartre de l’Egalité*), a lengthy document that outlined plans for gender equality both by sector and by ministry. When Dominique de Villepin replaced Raffarin as prime minister in the summer of 2005, Catherine Vautrin replaced Ameline in the lesser post of Delegate Minister for Social Cohesion and Parity. Vautrin picked up where her predecessor left off, shepherding Ameline’s equal pay law through parliament (Mazur 2005).

Given that there was a good deal of national government action on gender equality in employment policy, it is not surprising that this activity trickled down to the regional level, especially since the national government (via the Prefect and the Regional Women’s Rights Delegate) was willing to partner with the regional councils to support job training programs that were either specific to women or that possessed a women friendly plank. At the same time, a new approach toward gender equality at the European level impacted regional level policy making when it came to women. In 1997, the European Union ratified the Treaty of Amsterdam, which introduced gender mainstreaming (described above), an approach that soon became the central focus of EU gender equality policy through “financial incentives and soft law” (Mazur 2005). Given that the Alsatian regional council frequently referred to and relied on European

Social Funds to subsidize its job training and job placement measures for women, especially after 1998, it is clear that the EU's shift toward gender mainstreaming was felt at the regional level.

CONCLUSIONS

My comparison of Alsace and NPDC revealed that the number of women friendly policies increased as the number of female regional councilors increased, especially when they surpassed a "critical representation threshold" of 25 to 30 percent. My comparison also showed that similar numbers of women friendly policies were passed in both regions despite the fact that the NPDC council is controlled by a coalition of left-wing parties while the Right dominates the Alsatian assembly. Finally, my study showed that the content of women friendly policies was similar in both regions: NPDC and Alsace consistently worked to improve women's job training and placement.

At the same time, given the regional policy making process, I encountered the following puzzles over the course of my research: How could sheer numbers of women impact the policy process if decision making power is reserved for the small number of people who make up the Permanent Commission? Moreover, if the rise in the number of pro-women policies was not due to political ideology, then what explains its increase in both councils across time? To solve these puzzles, I examined who was responsible for policy making and the context in which the policies were made. Although neither council adopted a specifically women friendly policy agenda and/or a public commitment to gender mainstreaming, certain members of the regional executive and regional bureaucracy believed in gender equality and their actions contributed to the rise in women friendly policies. I also found that the social and political context influenced the policy process at the regional level. That is, the dissemination of information about persistent gender

inequalities in NPDC and Alsace as well as the pro-women policies made at the national and European levels created a context that was favorable for the passage of women friendly legislation in the regions.

Finally, I would argue that the conclusions drawn from my study have broader implications for the study of gender and politics. First, we have a clearer idea of what constitutes a “critical representation threshold” for the passage of women friendly policy. This study identified a threshold of 25 to 30 percent, which confirms a common notion held by gender and politics scholars that women should hold 15 to 30 percent of seats in an elective assembly (i.e. a critical mass of seats) if women’s substantive representation is to improve. Second, we know more about the indirect effects quota laws may (or may not have) on women’s substantive representation. That is, an increase in the number of women in elective assemblies (resulting from quota laws) may not be the sole source of women friendly policy. This finding confirms a theory popular among gender and politics scholars that a critical mass of female officeholders does not necessarily mean better substantive representation for women.

Finally, we know more about the role critical actors and critical contexts play in improving women’s substantive representation, especially in assemblies where parliamentary procedure governs policy making. Gender and politics scholars now have even more evidence to support the commonly held idea that certain individuals (both male and female) play a powerful role in determining whether women friendly policy is made. In addition, these scholars now have evidence that critical actors do not operate in a political vacuum. Instead, specific events taking place at the regional, national and international levels are instrumental in creating an environment that is conducive to the introduction and passage of pro-women policy. Thus, future studies seeking robust explanations of women’s substantive representation (especially in policy

terms) should play close attention to all three “C”s: critical mass, critical actors and critical contexts.

Notes

¹ In 1999 the French parliament amended the Constitution to favor the equal access of men and women to elected office, and in 2000 it adopted a gender parity law requiring that political parties nominate equal numbers of male and female candidates. Subsequent to the passage of the gender parity law in France, two other European countries passed similar legislation: Belgium in 2002 and Spain in 2007.

² Despite the dramatic increase in the number of women in municipal and regional councils following the passage of parity, it is said that the law’s success is limited because these sub-national assemblies are less powerful than those at the national and departmental levels (where the law was largely ignored). I would like to thank Catherine Achin and Sandrine Lévêque for reminding me of this point. For a complete investigation into the successes and failures of the 2000 parity law, see Troupel 2006.

³ Following the 2004 elections, the Right captured 65 percent of regional council seats (i.e. 27 seats were held by members of the two mainstream right-wing parties, the Union for French Democracy or UDF and Union for a Popular Movement or UMP, and 12 seats were occupied by members of the far-right National Front party.)

⁴ While most of the research on French women’s substantive representation focuses on the making of women friendly policy, there are also a small number of studies that examine whether French women “do” politics differently than men (see Achin et alii. 2007) and at least one study that investigates whether forces outside elective assemblies affect French women’s substantive representation (see Murray 2008).

⁵ In NPDC, I interviewed seven regional councilors, two regional bureaucrats and six members of women’s groups in the region. In Alsace, I spoke with six regional councilors, one regional bureaucrat, one national bureaucrat, and two women’s group members.

⁶ This definition was adapted from Beckwith and Cowell-Meyers 2007, 556.

⁷ The following groups benefited most from the NPDC council funding decisions (after CORIF and later CIDEF): Solidarity of Women and Families from Here and Elsewhere (*Solidarité aux Femmes et Familles d’Ici et d’Ailleurs* or SAFFIA), New Family Planning (*Nouveau Planning Familial* or NPF), Chicks’ Voices (*Voix des Nanans*), Women’s Path (*Parcours des Femmes*), the Local Association for Employed Women (*Association Locale des Femmes Actives*) and the French Union for Women’s Solidarity (*Union française des femmes solidaires* or UFFS).

⁸ Signed by the President of the regional council and the regional Prefect, the State-Region Contract Plan (*Contrat de Plan Etat-Région*) outlined how the national government and the regional council would co-finance a set of mutually agreed upon policy objectives over a six year period.

⁹ The Permanent Commission (made up of the council’s President, Vice-Presidents and representatives from the governing and opposition parties) meets on a monthly basis to make policy when the council is not in session.

¹⁰ The women-specific measures called for in the protocol included raising women’s awareness about various job opportunities, establishing women-specific job training programs, and creating support systems for women during and after job training programs. The broader integration of gender equality into regional job training was reflected in promises to assist job training institutions that pledged to help women and to train tutors and liaisons to work within businesses to improve gender equality in their job training and placement programs (CR NPDC 2001, no. 155).

¹¹ Specifically, the agreement included pledges to establish a gender equal job training policy by adopting measures to diversify young women’s career choices to include jobs traditionally held by men, to increase the assistance

provided to businesses and job training programs that want to achieve gender equality and to create various watchdog organizations to monitor the results. The agreement also promised a gender equal approach to “citizenship and solidarity” by improving women’s access to information and their power of self-expression through the support of existing groups like CIDEF in their efforts to disseminate information, the creation of new informational networks like a regional parity observatory and the funding of projects that promote the collective action of women (CR NPDC 2001, no. 157).

¹² HALDE (*Haute Autorité de lutte contre les Discriminations et pour l’Égalité*) is an independent administrative agency that was created in 2004 to help individuals identify discriminatory practices, to provide citizens with legal advice and to bring discrimination cases to court.

¹³ The regional executive (i.e. the President and Vice Presidents) is assisted in the policy making process by a number of policy commissions, which study and render opinions on policy issues under the executive’s consideration. The number and portfolio content of these commissions vary according to region. For example, in Alsace there are 12 commissions, two of which work to maintain the regional language and culture while in NPDC there are 13, including one devoted to “prevention and health”.

¹⁴ The corresponding policy commission, Commission 2, deals with international relations, Europe, associative partners, and economic solidarity.

¹⁵ The Regional Parity Observatory of NPDC was created in 2001 with the backing of the Regional Prefect and the Regional Women’s Rights Delegate and is composed a variety of organizations that support the idea of a gender equal society. The main goal of the Observatory is to collect and disseminate data on gender inequities in the region and to raise awareness about these inequities among the region’s decision makers. For more information on the Observatory, visit its website: www.egalite-mixite.com

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Table 1: Women Friendly Policies in Nord-Pas de Calais, 1986-2008

Year	1986-1992	1992-1998	1998-2004	2004-2010*
Percentage of women in Regional Council	12%	15%	32%	50%
Number of policies to fund women's groups	8 (88.88%)	28 (100.00%)	62 (89.85%)	39 (79.59%)
Number of broader policies including women friendly measures	1 (11.11%)	0 (0.00%)	7 (10.14%)	10 (20.41%)
Total number of women friendly policies	9	28	69	49

*Includes women friendly policies passed between April 2004 and July 2008; Aurélia Troupel provided the data on the percentage of women in the Regional Council; All other calculations are my own.

Table 2: Women Friendly Policies in Alsace, 1986-2008

Year	1986-1992	1992-1998	1998-2004	2004-2010*
Percentage of women in Regional Council	6%	11%	23%	49%
Number of policies to fund FRIFF	n/a	2 (15.38%)	41 (57.75%)	29 (50.88%)
Number of specifically women friendly policies	2	5 (38.46%)	18 (25.35%)	12 (21.05%)
Number of broader policies including women friendly measures	13	6 (46.15%)	12 (16.90%)	16 (28.07%)
Total number of women friendly policies	5	13	71	57

*Includes women friendly policies passed between April 2004 and July 2008; Aurélia Troupel provided the data on the percentage of women in the Regional Council; All other calculations are my own.