

Who Gets What? The Interactive Effect of MPs' Sex in Committee Assignments in Portugal

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This article investigates the role of key individual-level factors, namely expertise, seniority and preferences in women's assignments to legislative committees. It focuses on Portugal and draws on biographical data on MPs in five elections until 2009 and interviews with 20 legislators in 2014. The results show that female and male MPs have a similar probability of being appointed to powerful and economic issue committees, but female MPs are more likely to be appointed to social issue committees regardless of expertise and seniority. Although this outcome might be the product of their own preferences, it is influenced by embedded gender norms.

Keywords: Committee assignment, Expertise, Seniority, Preferences, Portugal, Women

1. Introduction

Parliamentary committees create opportunities for legislative efficiency and productivity; they are therefore one of the most significant internal organisational features of modern parliaments (Strøm, 1998, p. 24). Many factors influence appointments to legislative committees, namely national regulations, party-level factors such as internal organisational characteristics and party size, and MPs' characteristics, e.g. personal preferences, areas of expertise, seniority and incumbency. But is the MPs' sex also of relevance?

Political institutions, including parliaments and political parties, are not gender neutral; they are gendered. This means that constructions of masculinity and femininity are intertwined in their daily culture (Kenny, 2013, p. 37). Moreover, as a result of the historic exclusion of women, gender norms in political

institutions are mainly masculine, i.e. a deeply embedded culture of masculinity pervades politics, rewarding codes of masculinity and disallowing codes of femininity (Lovenduski, 2005). Therefore, the increase in women's descriptive political representation in most countries' legislatures in the last decades, due largely to the international trend towards adopting gender quotas, is probably not reflected in a more balanced distribution of power between women and men. This article helps shed light on this discussion by looking at committee nominations.

An appointment to a highly prestigious committee is an institutionally valuable resource for MPs (Friedman, 1996, p. 74); it is both a way of gaining power and prestige (Cox and McCubbins, 2005) and also crucial for influencing policy-making (Friedman, 1996; Pansardi and Vercesi, 2017). Thus, not only can we argue that women and men should be present among political elites in roughly equal numbers on the grounds of fairness (Dovi, 2007, p. 308), but the physical presence of traditionally under-represented groups (such as ethnic minorities, people with disabilities or women) in a committee might make a difference in terms of policy (Phillips, 1995; Mansbridge, 1999) and hence contribute to improving democratic deliberation (Dovi, 2007, p. 309).

This article has two main objectives. The first is to understand whether women have been over- or under-represented in different kinds of committees. As political institutions are not gender neutral, it is likely that pre-existing gender norms interact with individual-level factors considered crucial to committee membership, namely expertise, seniority and preferences (Leston-Bandeira, 2004; Strøm, 1998; Yordanova, 2009; Whitaker, 2018). Therefore, the second objective of this article is to explore whether these individual level factors are equally relevant for the committee assignments of women and men.¹

Although a consistent body of research suggests there is a bias against female candidates in committee appointments (Thomas, 1994; Towns, 2003; Diaz, 2005; Heath et al., 2005; Schwindt-Bayer, 2010), more recent scholarship has shown signs of change (Baekgaard and Kjaer, 2012; O'Brien, 2012; Kerevel and Atkeson, 2013; Barnes, 2014). This study contributes to this debate by examining committee assignments in Portugal, which is a relevant case study for four reasons. First, although committees are not enforced by the constitution, in line with the international trend (Strøm, 1998, p. 24), they play a crucial role both in passing legislation and exercising political control (i.e. supervising) (Ribeiro and Cid, 2008, p. 98). Moreover, committees have become increasingly significant (Leston-Bandeira, 2004, p. 46). Secondly, Portugal has witnessed marked changes in the

¹Incorporating an adequate conception of gender into quantitative work remains a huge challenge (Lovenduski, 2016, p. 523). Although this research also suffers from this constraint, and in some parts we employ a dichotomous variable of sex, we have integrated a gender perspective as much as possible into our analysis and reflections.

presence of women in political power, namely in the national parliament, in recent decades. Whereas only 5% of the MPs were women at the start of the democratic regime in 1976, the figure has now (September 2018) risen to 34.8%, slightly higher than the European average (27.7%). Moreover, the adoption of legislative gender quotas (Parity Law) in 2006 (see [Espírito-Santo, 2018](#) for more details on the law) makes Portugal a relevant case study to examine the patterns of committee appointment before and after a quota law. Thirdly, to our knowledge, this is the first study on Portugal focusing on the role of MPs' sex in committee assignments and one of the first to look empirically into committee appointments (see [Fernandes, 2016](#) for appointments to committee chairs). Fourthly, 'much remains unknown about how committee assignments happen and with what causes' ([Martin and Mickler, 2019](#), p. 78) but we do know that 'the assignment process is structured by country-specific patterns' (2019, p. 86). Hence, information on an unexplored case study such as Portugal furthers the understanding of the mechanisms behind committee appointments and, hence, the power relations within legislatures.

This article uses quantitative and qualitative data collected within two different projects offering complementary insights on committee appointments. The first is an original and rich dataset with background biographical data and committee assignments for the candidates elected to the Portuguese National Parliament (*Assembleia da República*) in five elections until 2009. The second is a set of 20 interviews conducted in 2014 with MPs from all parties represented in parliament at the time.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. After presenting the theoretical hypotheses on committee appointments, a description is given of the Portuguese context. The following sections explain the data and variables employed in the empirical analysis and provide the main results. Lastly, we discuss the main findings and suggest further avenues for research.

2. The role of MPs' sex in committee assignments

The initial research on committee appointments focused on the US Congress (e.g. [Cox and McCubbins, 1993](#); [Gilligan and Krehbiel, 1990](#)), and studies on the European Parliament ([Whitaker, 2018](#); [Yordanova, 2009](#)) and national legislatures outside the US (e.g. [Ciftci et al., 2008](#); [Mickler, 2018a, 2018b](#)) appeared much later. This explains why most of the latter research follows the so-called congressional framework of legislative organisation ([Martin and Mickler, 2019](#)), comprising distributive theory, informational theory and partisan theory.

The usefulness of this important framework is however limited when the research centres on the role of MPs' sex in committee appointments. The flourishing research on this topic has focused on two key questions ([Baekgaard and Kjaer, 2012](#)).

The first is descriptive and aims to depict the distribution of women and men across different committees. Prestige is often used to rank committees, and most research on the role of MPs' sex in appointments finds an uneven distribution of women and men across committees. Women are often overrepresented in social issue committees and those dealing with equality, and underrepresented in powerful committees and those representing issues that are traditionally 'men's' domains (Thomas, 1994; Friedman, 1996; Towns, 2003; Diaz, 2005; Heath et al., 2005; Schwindt-Bayer, 2010; Kerevel and Atkeson, 2013; Bolzendahl, 2014; Pansardi and Vercesi, 2017). Given that this pattern is even found in Denmark, one of the most advanced countries in terms of gender equality in politics, we expect to find similar disparities in most other settings (as argued by Baekgaard and Kjaer, 2012, p. 480). Thus, our first theoretical expectation is:

Women are overrepresented in social issue committees and underrepresented in powerful committees and committees that deal with issues that are traditionally 'men's' domains (Hypothesis 1: H1).

The second key question addresses the determinants of women's appointments to legislative committees. When examining this issue, it is useful to identify the main explanatory factors and observe whether the differences between women and men remain once we control for these factors. If so, there are grounds to believe that there is gender discrimination. A systematic literature review emphasises expertise, seniority and preferences as the three main determinants for committee assignments.

Specialisation is one of the greatest benefits of legislative committees: 'legislators benefit from their familiarity with the substance and procedures they encounter in their respective committees, compared with the legislative agenda as a whole', enabling economies of operation (Strøm, 1998, pp. 24–25). Committee members are important for shaping party policy (Friedman, 1996; Pansardi and Vercesi, 2017) and therefore party leaders value committee members with expertise in relevant policy areas (Ciftci et al., 2008; Mickler 2018a, 2018b). It is pertinent to note the differences between women and men in expertise: female MPs are more likely to have careers in education, while men are more likely to come from business backgrounds (Thomas, 1994).

The role of seniority in committee appointments is less consensual. While the number of legislative periods an MP has served has no effect on nomination to important committees in Ireland (Mickler, 2018b, p. 129) and Germany (Mickler, 2018a), in other national legislatures, such as Turkey (Ciftci et al., 2008) and the USA (Cox and McCubbins, 1993), seniority is relevant. Literature on the relationship between incumbency and the sex of MPs appointed to committees observes that women's marginalisation is largely explained by

incumbency (Kerevel and Atkeson, 2013, p. 990). Similarly, Barnes' (2014) study of Argentina shows that the differences in committee appointments are explained by the fact that women are more often newcomers than men.

Self-selection to certain committees is mainly important in the case of the USA, but also cannot be ignored in settings where political parties play a more determinant role. It has been often argued that party leaders take MPs' individual preferences into account when appointing them to legislative committees (Thomas, 1994; Leston-Bandeira, 2004, p. 44; Carroll, 2008; Schwindt-Bayer, 2010; Baekgaard and Kjaer, 2012; Raymond and Holt, 2019; Whitaker, 2018); one cited exception is Ireland, where MPs are usually not requested to express their preferences (Mickler, 2018b). Although the preferred committees of female and male MPs tend to be different (Baekgaard and Kjaer, 2012), women legislators are not more likely to be dissatisfied with their committee appointment (Carroll, 2008, p. 148).

In addition, the expertise and seniority of male and female MPs are unlikely to be perceived and valued in the same way by party leaders. In fact, given that female politicians are still stereotyped (Herrnson et al., 2003), that political institutions in general are profoundly gendered (Kenny, 2013) and political parties tend to be 'institutionally sexist' organisations (Lovenduski, 2005), we should expect these key individual-level factors to be overlooked in some cases and exacerbated in others. More specifically, we anticipate that:

- More men (than women) without expertise are appointed to 'powerful committees' and to committees dealing with issues that are traditionally 'men's' domains, and more women (than men) without expertise are appointed to social issue committees (Hypothesis 2: H2);
- Male MPs that are not newcomers (i.e. seniors) are less often appointed to social issue committees and more often appointed to powerful committees, when compared to their female counterparts (Hypothesis 3: H3).

The impact of the growing number of female MPs in parliament has recently warranted some attention in the literature, but the findings are not straightforward. While some studies argue that it accentuates differences between sexes as it means women are more likely to be appointed to social issue committees (Towns, 2003; Heath et al., 2005; Barnes, 2014), others find it has no effect at all (Carroll, 2008; Kerevel and Atkeson, 2013). Thus, the adoption of a gender quota will be taken into consideration when analysing H3 as it often implies a surge in female newcomers.

In light of the above mentioned literature, our expectation on preferences is that the parties strive to appoint MPs to their preferred committee. Therefore, our last hypothesis poses that:

Female and male MPs tend to sit on their preferred committee(s) (Hypothesis 4: H4).

3. Legislative committees in Portugal

Since the transition to democracy, the Portuguese National Parliament has been elected through a closed-list proportional representation (CLPR) system. Under this system, the parties are the key organisational units both outside and within the legislature (Braga da Cruz, 1988; Leston-Bandeira, 2004; Leston-Bandeira, 2009; Fernandes, 2016). Parties determine the lists of candidates, albeit with varying degrees of inclusiveness (Sanches and Razzuoli, 2017), and voters can only choose one list over the others. Whether a candidate is elected largely depends on the party's performance and on her/his position on the list, thus making intra-party competition crucial (Braga da Cruz, 1988; Fernandes, 2016). If elected, most candidates stay within their party's parliamentary group (PG); however, they can sit as independents if they abandon their original PG (Leston-Bandeira, 2004, p. 40).

According to the Portuguese Constitution, MPs represent the whole nation and not their constituencies; as a result, the central role in parliament is played by PGs rather than individual MPs (Leston-Bandeira, 2004, p. 41). Despite their lack of autonomy in this framework (Opello, 1986; Braga da Cruz 1988), individual MPs find ways of expressing 'disagreement with the party' (Leston-Bandeira, 2009), and they sometimes represent their constituency's interests in parliament (Leston-Bandeira, 2004, pp. 130–133; Fernandes, 2016; Fernandes et al., 2018). Moreover, the 2007 Reform of Parliament has enhanced the role, visibility and working conditions of individual MPs in parliamentary activity (Leston-Bandeira and Tibúrcio, 2012). MPs can now 'head the bills they propose themselves rather than through their parliamentary group leader', their work has become more visible and accessible to citizens via the parliament's website, and the Statute of Deputies now establishes that MPs should have an individual office, assistant, email and webpage (Leston-Bandeira and Tibúrcio, 2012, p. 390).

Along with the plenary, the specialised standing committees (*Comissões especializadas permanentes*)² perform the parliament's main activities. Between 1983 and 2009, considerable changes were made to the role and importance given to committees. Until 1983, all legislative proceedings took place (as a rule) in the plenary and committees had little autonomous competence; however, the competences and time attributed to plenary debates has since been reduced while the committees' role in the legislative proceedings has been enhanced considerably (Leston-Bandeira, 2004, p. 46). For instance, between 1985 and 1988, committees were given the right to meet at the same time as the plenary (previously forbidden), the second reading of each bill and hence the discussion and vote on its

²In addition to specialised standing committees, there are special committees. Our dataset is only composed of standing committees.

individual articles was ascribed to them (previously this had to be done in the plenary) and they were given the power to conduct studies, undertake parliamentary auditions and request the testimony of any citizen (Leston-Bandeira, 2004, p. 48).

Currently, there is no limit to the number of specialised standing committees in each legislature (there was a limit of 14 up until 2007). The number and their specific competences are decided on at the beginning of each legislature and result from the political negotiation between all parties represented in parliament (Ribeiro and Cid, 2008, p. 108). Traditionally, there are 12 standing committees and, like other European democracies, standing committees have a significant overlap with the ministerial jurisdictions (Leston-Bandeira, 2004, p. 43; Fernandes, 2016, p. 115).

3.1 Committee appointment

All formal rules on committee appointment are set out in the Rules of Procedure of the Portuguese National Parliament, entitled *Regimento da Assembleia da República* [RAR]³. Contrary to what happens in other parliaments worldwide, the committees in the Portuguese National Parliament do not have a fixed number of members; they can vary from one legislature to another (Article 29, paragraph 4) but, on average, they have between 19 and 21 members (Ribeiro and Cid, 2008, p. 113).

According to the RAR, the PGs are responsible for the appointment of their MPs to parliamentary committees (Article 30, paragraph 1) and since 2007 each MP can only be a full member of one committee (Article 30, paragraph 3). The one exception to this rule is when it is necessary to appoint MPs of small parties to more than one committee in order to guarantee that the composition of parliamentary committees is proportional to each party's share of the seats in parliament, which constitutes another rule (Article 29, paragraph 1).

The RAR rules in relation to independent MPs are particularly interesting. In a process similar to that of Ireland (Mickler, 2018b, p. 123), independent MPs are first asked to indicate the committees they would like to join; after hearing from the leaders of all PGs, the President of the Assembly then designates the independent MPs to a committee(s), trying to meet their preferences whenever possible (Article 30, paragraph 7). The RAR does not specify any rule on how the PG should appoint their MPs to committees. However, the fact that preferences are formally taken into account for independent MPs is in keeping with the findings of the few existing studies on the informal aspects of this process within PGs.

³http://www.parlamento.pt/legislacao/documents/legislacao_annotada/regimentoar_simples.pdf (accessed 21 September 2018).

To our knowledge, no previous research has been conducted specifically to understand committee appointment in Portugal. However, two related studies touch upon this topic and make noteworthy suggestions. Drawing on interviews with sixteen Portuguese political actors, Leston-Bandeira observes, without further development, that MPs' preferences and expertise are taken into account when they are appointed by PGs to committees (Leston-Bandeira, 2004, p. 43). Another related piece of research uses a dataset including all MPs serving in the Portuguese Parliament between 2005 and 2011 and concludes that parties rely on *ex ante* biographical information, such as incumbency, to select committee chairs and party coordinators, and on *ex-post* mechanisms, such as positions in the party structure, to nominate party coordinators. However, the characteristics of these two positions are different from those of an ordinary committee member. Therefore, a comprehensive account of how MPs are appointed to committees is clearly lacking.

4. Data and models

Two kinds of data were employed to test the hypotheses presented in this study. An original and rich dataset of biographical background data and information on committee membership of MPs of the Portuguese National Parliament was used for H1, H2 and H3. This dataset (Espírito-Santo and Sanches, 2012), assembled within the framework of the project Collaborative Research: Electoral Systems and Party Personnel: The Consequences of Reform and Non-Reform, covers five parliamentary elections in 1983, 1995, 2002, 2005 and 2009⁴ and includes information on all elected candidates for a total of 1170 observations. Following a common classification of committees employed in the literature focusing on the role of MPs' sex in committee appointments (Heath et al., 2005, p. 421; Kerevel and Atkeson, 2013, p. 984; Barnes, 2014, p. 11),⁵ we created three categories of committees based on the kinds of issue they address: social and women's issues committees (SWIC), economic issue committees (EIC) and powerful committees

⁴Collecting comprehensive biographical data in the framework of the project meant that only a handful of elections could be included. The selection made by the team sought to allow comparability with the other cases included in the project while encompassing contextual variation. The starting point was the 1983 election, which came after the 1982 constitutional amendment, often seen as a marker of Portugal democratic consolidation (Costa, 2010). The following elections capture different governing formulas including minority (Socialist Party: 1995, 2005, 2009) and coalition governments (Social Democratic Party and Democratic Social Centre-Popular Party: 2002). This choice further helps to depict the characteristics of the parliament before and after the adoption of gender quotas in 2006.

⁵However, some studies use other classifications of committees (Friedman, 1996; Diaz, 2005; Schwandt-Bayer, 2010).

(PC). SWIC cover the following areas: health, education, culture, youth, equality and the status of women. They are usually considered 'soft' committees, in contrast to EIC which are also referred to in the literature as 'hard' committees. The latter include economic, finance and budget issues. PC are the most prestigious committees and comprise foreign affairs, national defence and constitutional issues; they are also known as 'high policy' committees. In the Portuguese National Parliament, committees are named by their rank order of importance: first committee, second committee, etc, hence, PC are usually the first three committees of each legislature. PC are usually the first three committees of each legislature. We added distributive committees (DC) to the three previous types of committee; DC deal with agriculture, fisheries, public works, local power, environment and territory planning. According to distributive theories, parties will seek to secure votes by awarding particularistic benefits to key constituencies (Pekkanen et al., 2006, p. 189). This is particularly the case in open-list systems in which the personal vote and constituency links are fostered, but much less so in closed-list systems like that of Portugal; moreover, DC are less visible and prestigious when compared to committees dealing with high policy and economic issues. Although we have no clear expectation as to whether MPs' sex is important to their nomination to these committees, we believe this is a good opportunity to clarify the matter. For a full description of how committees were classified see [Supplementary Table S1](#).

The dependent variable is whether an MP is or is not a full member of each kind of committee (1 = yes; 0 = no). Until 2007, MPs were able to serve in up to two committees (Ribeiro and Cid, 2008, p. 114); thus, membership in committees was not mutually exclusive. Since 2007, MPs can only sit on one committee unless it is necessary to guarantee proportional representation of all PGs; this means that in smaller PGs the same MP might sit on up to three committees (RAR, Article 29, paragraph 6). Given these specificities, we estimated *probit regressions* which, by examining one committee at a time, allow us to tackle the issue of dual membership. Furthermore, all models include robust standard errors clustered at the election year due to the hierarchical structure of the data.

The models estimated included three key independent variables: *Female* (1 = woman; 0 = man); *Newcomer* (1 = MP is newly elected; 0 = MP has served in a prior legislature), and *Expertise* (1 = MP has both the educational and the professional expertise required for the post; 0 = otherwise). Four variables measure expertise for each type of committee: expertise for EIC implies that the MP has a degree and professional career in economics and management; expertise for PC implies s/he has a degree in law and public administration and has had a career as lawyer, judge or senior government official; expertise for DC means that the MP has studied and worked in areas related to engineering, mathematics, architecture, etc.; and finally expertise for SWIC includes an educational and

professional background broadly related to health, social and human sciences (full description in [Supplementary Table S2](#)). *Expertise* and *Newcomer* entered the first model alone as controls (H1) and then interacted with *Female*, so as to test the theoretical assumptions under H2 and H3.

In addition, several explanatory variables put forward by literature on committee appointment were added as controls. At the individual level, we included *Position on the list* as top-ranked MPs are more likely to be assigned to high-policy committees in proportional closed-list electoral systems (Riera and Cantú, 2018, p. 530). At the party level, we considered: *Party size* (number of MPs the party has in the house), *Governing party* (1 = yes, 0 = no) and *Left-wing party* (1 = if the party is leftist; 0 = if the party is rightist⁶). *Party size* was included since the number of MPs a party has in the parliament might influence crucial decisions in terms of committee assignment. *Governing party* matters as it has been shown that women in the governing party are less likely to be restricted to women's and social issue committees than female legislators in the opposition (Heath et al., 2005, p. 430). Party ideology and its relationship to gender bias have also been vastly addressed in the literature. A consensual finding is that *left-wing parties* are usually more associated with the election of women to parliaments than right-wing parties (Kittilson, 1999, p. 87; Lovenduski and Norris, 1993, p. 320). However, when looking specifically at committee appointments, the results do not always go in the expected direction (Carroll, 2008, p. 145; Pansardi and Vercesi, 2017, p. 74). Finally, at the chamber level, we consider the percentage of *Women in chamber* (measured as the percentage of seats held by women).

For H4, we rely on semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 20 MPs (14 female and 6 male) from all political parties represented in parliament, conducted between July and September 2014 within the project *Mulh(j)er e Poder: Women's Political Representation in Portugal and Spain* (see [Supplementary Table S3](#) for more details on the interviewees). Despite the time lag between the interviews and the biographical data, these interviews are meaningful, particularly because Portugal has a very high legislative turnover (Matland and Studlar, 2004). In fact, 14 out of the 20 interviewees are part of our datasets although they are obviously sitting in a different legislature. Furthermore, the qualitative data that results from the interviews provide valuable insights on the informal rules that cannot be obtained through quantitative research. Nevertheless, we recognise

⁶Leftist parties are: Socialist Party (PS), Left Bloc (BE), Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), Ecologist Party 'The Greens' (PEV), Social Democratic Independent Action (ADSI), Portuguese Democratic Movement—Democratic Electoral Commission (MDP/CDE) and Leftist Union for the Socialist Democracy (UEDS); rightist parties are: Democratic Social Centre-Popular Party (CDS-PP), Social Democratic Party (PSD) and Popular Monarchist Party (PPM).

that a proper test of the relevance of MPs' committee preferences entails data on all MPs included in our dataset so that a similar analysis can be made to the one performed for the previous two individual level-factors. However, as this data could not be collected, we decided to proceed with an exploratory analysis of H4 based on the refereed interviews. It should also be noted that the interview script focused on the broader legislative activities of MPs and that only the questions concerning committees are relevant to this article.

5. Determinants of women's committee appointments

The number of women in the Portuguese National Parliament has risen steadily. However, little is known about the legislative committees to which women are more likely to be appointed once in parliament. If appointment strategies were gender neutral, then the proportion of women in each legislative committee would mirror the percentage of women in parliament. Our expectation under H1 is that women are overrepresented in SWIC and underrepresented in committees dealing with high policy and economic issues (PC and EIC). The descriptive statistics presented in Table 1 give partial support to this expectation. In fact, women are systematically

Table 1 Percentage of female MPs across different legislative committees by year

| Year | Economic issues committees | | | Powerful committees | Distributive committees | Social and women issues committees |
|------|--|----------|------|---------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1983 | Percentage of women in parliament: 7.2% | | | | | |
| | Female members in the committee | <i>N</i> | 0 | 5 | 2 | 9 |
| | | % | 0 | 8.2 | 5.4 | 13.2 |
| | Total members | <i>N</i> | 21 | 61 | 37 | 68 |
| 1995 | Percentage of women in parliament: 12.2% | | | | | |
| | Female members in the committee | <i>N</i> | 1 | 5 | 6 | 14 |
| | | % | 5.88 | 6 | 15.0 | 23.0 |
| | Total members | <i>N</i> | 17 | 78 | 40 | 61 |
| 2002 | Percentage of women in parliament: 19.6% | | | | | |
| | Female members in the committee | <i>N</i> | 6 | 3 | 7 | 10 |
| | | % | 15.4 | 13.0 | 20.6 | 34.5 |
| | Total | <i>N</i> | 39 | 23 | 34 | 29 |
| 2005 | Percentage of women in parliament: 21.3% | | | | | |
| | Female members in the committee | <i>n</i> | 4 | 8 | 6 | 12 |
| | | % | 20.0 | 15.7 | 19.4 | 30.0 |
| | Total members | <i>N</i> | 20 | 51 | 31 | 40 |
| 2009 | Percentage of women in parliament: 27% | | | | | |
| | Female members in the committee | <i>n</i> | 10 | 17 | 10 | 31 |
| | | % | 28.6 | 23.9 | 20.8 | 48.4 |
| | Total members | <i>N</i> | 35 | 71 | 48 | 64 |

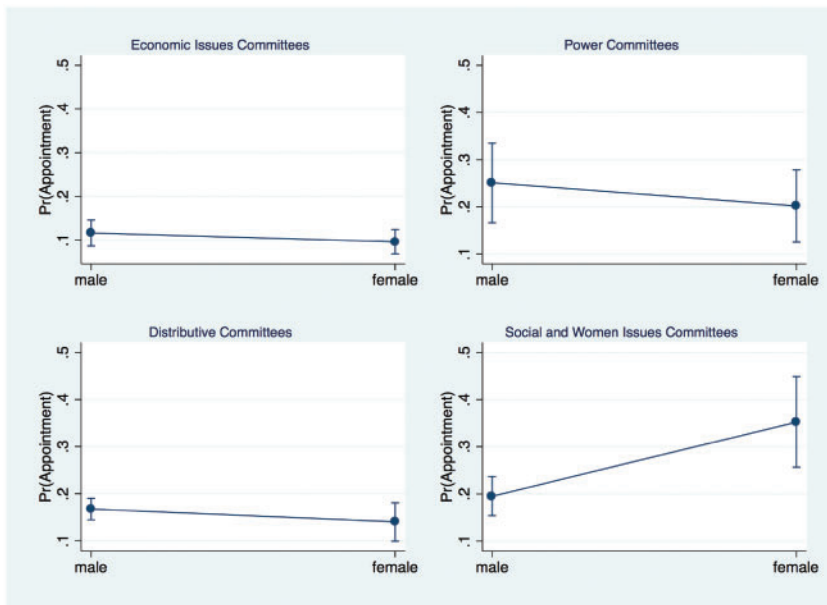


Figure 1. Predictive margins of being appointed to different types of legislative committee according to MPs sex.

Note: Predicted margins with 95% CIs, with all variables centred at their mean.

overrepresented in SWIC in all years and particularly 2009 when there are over 20% more women in SWIC vis-a-vis the percentage of women in parliament. Although the results also show that women are underrepresented in PC and EIC, this has gradually decreased and, notably, mainly in the latter. DC follows a more irregular pattern, with women's underrepresentation becoming more evident since 2005.

The [Supplementary Table S4](#) presents the results of the regression analysis conducted to effectively test H1. Overall, the preliminary findings are confirmed: female MPs are appointed to SWIC much more often than to any other committee type, even after controlling for seniority and expertise. As the predicted margin plots indicate ([Figure 1](#)), with all variables centred at their mean, the probability of a female MP being appointed to SWIC is 35% (vis-a-vis 20% for male MPs). For PC and EIC, there is also a distinction between women and men in the expected direction but the differences in predicted margins are not significant because the confidence intervals overlap. Therefore, H1 is partially confirmed: although there is an overrepresentation of women in SWIC, there is no significant underrepresentation of female MPs in the other committees.

Before examining the next hypothesis, we will briefly report the results for the control variables at the individual level. *Expertise* stands out as a key individual-level factor: MPs with the required expertise for the post are likely to be

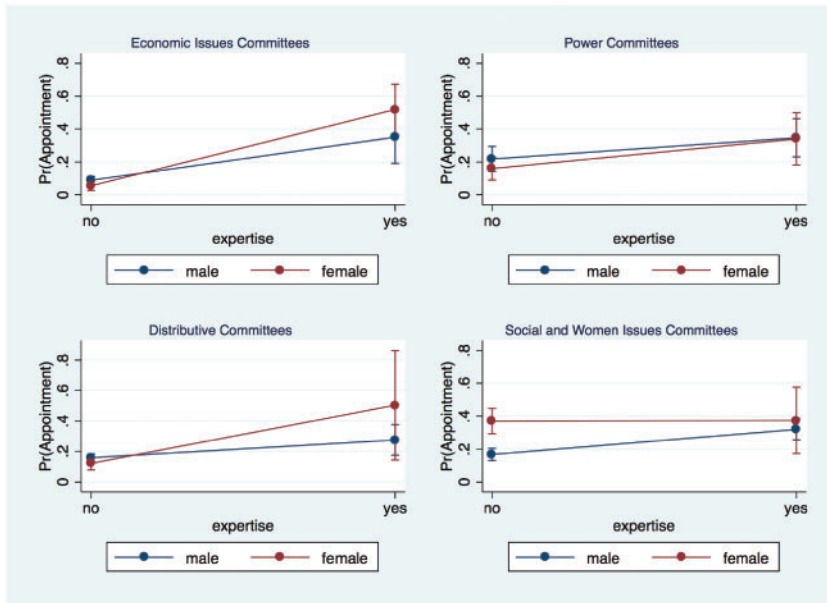


Figure 2. Predicted margins of being appointed to different committees according to MPs sex and expertise.

Note: Predicted margins with 95% CIs, with all variables centred at their mean.

appointed to the committee that best matches their professional and educational background. We also find that *newcomer* MPs have a significantly higher probability of being appointed to SWIC and to DC, whereas seniority is an asset for appointment to the most prestigious committees (no significant effect found for EIC). *Position on the list* only follows our expectation for appointments to SWIC; MPs at the bottom of the list are more likely to be appointed to this type of committee. Finally, the remaining party and chamber variables display little and non-systematic effects on committee assignment.

As can be seen in [Supplementary Table S5](#), women frequently have educational and occupational backgrounds related to social issues, while men are more often specialised in areas related to PC and EIC, thus confirming that women and men also differ in their area of expertise in Portugal (see for example, [Thomas, 1994](#)). Our goal under H2 is to test whether more men (than women) without expertise are assigned to EIC and PC, and more women (than men) without expertise are appointed to SWIC. The statistical results only offer partial confirmation for H2 ([Supplementary Table S6](#)). On the one hand, as expected, the predicted margins ([Figure 2](#)) show that female MPs with no expertise in social issues are almost twice as likely to be appointed to SWIC as male MPs: a female MP with no expertise in social issues has a 32%

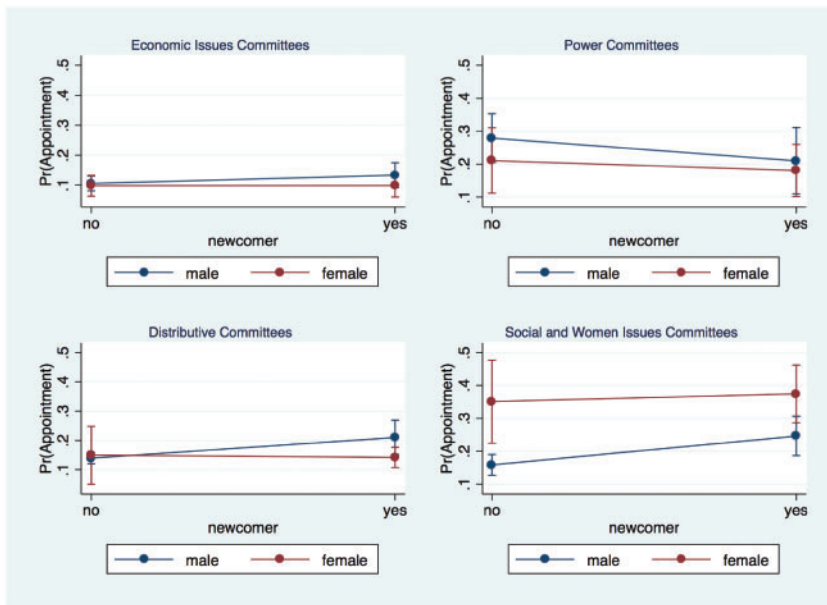


Figure 3. Predicted margins of being appointed to different committees according to MPs sex and to whether she/he is a newcomer.

Note: Predicted margins with 95% CIs, with all variables centred at their mean.

predicted probability of being appointed to SWIC vis-à-vis 17% for male MPs. Furthermore, the flat line of female SWIC members' reveals that the relevant expertise actually has no bearing on women's appointment to SWIC; this suggests that whereas it is enough in some cases to be female to ensure appointment to that committee, it is an asset for men to have expertise in the area. On the other hand, female and male MPs with expertise have the same probability of being appointed to EIC, DC and even PC, and those without expertise (irrespective of sex) have a lower probability of appointment.

The next hypothesis (H3) contends that male MPs that are not newcomers (i.e. seniors) are less often appointed to social issue committees and more often assigned to powerful committees, when compared to their female counterparts. It additionally explores any changes in this pattern after the introduction of the 2006 quota law in Portugal. It should first be noted that the percentage of female newcomers exceeds that of men in every legislature analysed (see [Supplementary Table S7](#)). The results of the regression analysis (see [Supplementary Table S8](#)), shown in [Figure 3](#), partially support our expectations. As in all previous hypotheses, we only find significant differences in the appointments to SWIC: as anticipated, male MPs tend to be appointed to SWIC significantly less once they have

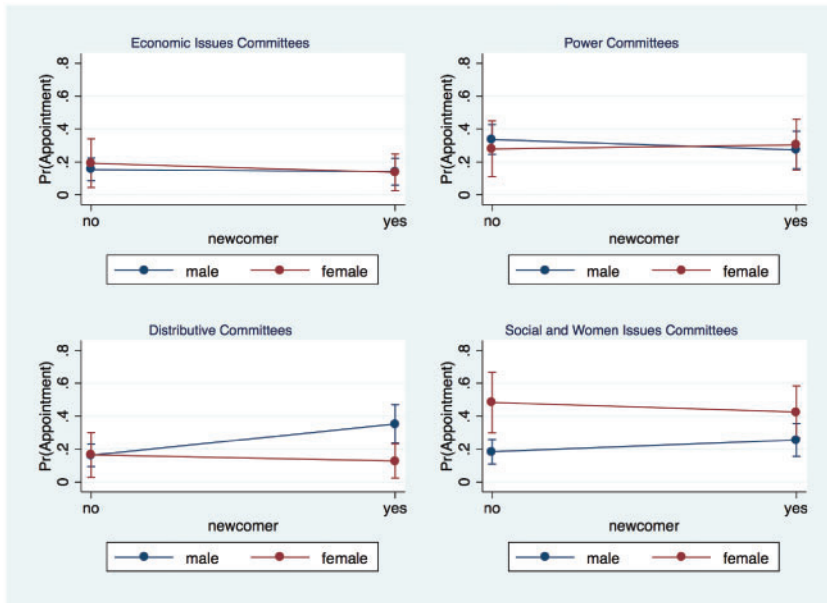


Figure 4. Predicted margins of being appointed to different committees according to MPs sex and to whether she/he is a newcomer (model for 2009).

Note: Predicted margins with 95% CIs, with all variables centred at their mean.

gained parliamentary experience, while female MPs remain strongly represented in this committee whether they are newcomers or more experienced legislators.

Moreover, although over 50% of female MPs were newcomers in the first legislature after the approval of the quota law (2009),⁷ there were no visible changes in the probability of female newcomers being assigned to SWIC (see Figure 4, and Supplementary Table S9). This finding suggests that, like Mexico (Kerevel and Atkeson, 2013), the implementation of quotas in Portugal did not increase women's marginalisation. The increase in the percentage of women on SWIC in 2009 relative to previous legislatures that can be seen in Table 1, is due to the fact that there were more female parliamentarians in that year than ever before. The pattern of committee assignment remains the same. Observation of more post-2009 legislatures would allow us to confirm whether these findings hold.

Taken together, the results do not sustain a narrative of strong female marginalisation across different committee types: female and male MPs have the same probability of being appointed to EIC, PC or DC (Figure 1), and women's expertise and seniority are valued by party leaders for these nominations

⁷See Supplementary Table S7.

in the same way as men's (Figures 2 and 3). Nevertheless, our results do show that women tend to be appointed to SWIC more frequently (Figure 1 and Table 1) and that, unlike men, women's nominations to SWIC do not depend on either expertise (Figure 2) or their experience in the legislature (Figure 3). However, it remains unclear whether female MPs are pushed into those committees by party leaders or if this reflects their preferences. Thus, our final hypothesis (H4), seeks to qualitatively explore whether MPs are placed in their committee(s) of choice.

The interviews with MPs reveal that the overall feeling is that the appointment process takes place 'naturally' and 'logically'.⁸ Decisions are made within each PG and usually involve a negotiation process that is more or less flexible and consensual. The wishes, preferences and professional experience of the MPs are usually taken into account regardless of sex.⁹ The following statement is a clear illustration of this: 'at the beginning of the legislature all MPs are asked to indicate their preferences. The party then tries to assign the MPs to their first or second option whenever possible. The MPs' preferences, profile, and what they feel more confident doing are taken into account'.¹⁰

However, some differences can be seen across PGs. While some decision making processes look more party-centred and less determined by MPs' preferences,¹¹ others appear to be guided more by the MPs' wishes who seem to 'get the committee they asked for'¹²; in line with results of previous studies (Whitaker, 2018). Overall, whether it is party leadership or the MPs themselves that influence the decision-making process, the MPs interviewed evaluated the appointment process very positively; their satisfaction with the allotted committee¹³ is demonstrated by the following statements: 'sometimes I cannot even believe that I am paid to do what I do!';¹⁴ 'I was assigned to all the committees I'd chosen [and I am] very, very satisfied with the committees I got'¹⁵; 'I was appointed to all the

⁸Interviewees No. 2, 8 and 11.

⁹Interviewees No. 1, 2, 3, 4, 16 and 18.

¹⁰Interviewee No. 16.

¹¹Interviewees No. 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12.

¹²Interviewees No. 5, 6, 7, 13, 17 and 19.

¹³Interviewees No. 1, 3, 4, 6, 13, 20 and more neutral for 2, 10 and 11.

¹⁴Interviewee No. 6.

¹⁵Interviewee No. 20.

committees I asked for'.¹⁶ The MPs also highlight the fact that the committees they got matches their interests and their career background: 'I would say yes, the domains covered [by the committee] interest me a lot'¹⁷; 'I chose the committees based on my professional background. I have been a teacher for 32 years and I am currently part of the Education Committee'.¹⁸

MPs' sex does not seem to be a key individual-level factor except in one case, reported by a female interviewee,¹⁹ of a female MP who was substituted against her will in the defence committee by a male peer. However, according to the same interviewee, these are uncommon situations.

Our interviewees' overall perception that they were assigned to their preferred committee indicates that women's overrepresentation in SWIC is at least in part due to preference although one episode suggests a tendency to push women into more social issue committees.

6. Conclusions

Committee memberships are both scarce and valuable resources for MPs in a legislative chamber (Heath et al., 2005). By choosing reliable committee members, leaders can indirectly control the party's long-range policy positions (Strøm, 1998, p. 40); therefore, some MPs might be in a better position than others to be appointed to their preferred committee. Who the committee's members are is a relevant issue not only in terms of the question of justice but also because they can potentially influence policy outcomes. The Portuguese case corroborates recent scholarship indicating signs of change and a relative equilibrium between women and men in committee assignments (Baekgaard and Kjaer, 2012; O'Brien, 2012; Kerevel and Atkeson, 2013; Barnes, 2014). In fact, MPs' sex is almost irrelevant for nomination to the most prestigious committees and those linked to traditionally 'male' domains. However, it is significant in the case of appointments to social issue committees where women are systematically overrepresented; in fact, this trend has been increasing as the percentage of the chamber occupied by women rises.

The justifications given for the differences between women and men in SWIC appointments vary. Some argue that it is largely due to *demand factors* and that women are marginalised (Heath et al., 2005; Schwindt-Bayer, 2010), while others

¹⁶Interviewees No. 20.

¹⁷Interviewees No. 3.

¹⁸Interviewees No. 18.

¹⁹Interviewee No. 14.

explain it with *supply factors*, namely women's expertise and a greater preference for committees dealing with these issues than men (Thomas, 1994; Carroll, 2008; Schwandt-Bayer, 2010; Baekgaard and Kjaer, 2012). Our research suggests that although both explanations are relevant, supply-side factors are the most important as we explain below.

Starting with supply-side factors, we observed that women have the right expertise for SWIC and are newcomers more often than men. Since both expertise and seniority are key explanatory variables for committee appointment, we would expect the differences between women and men in SWIC assignments to vanish once we control for these two factors. Nevertheless, this is not the case. Due to limitations in our data, we could not include committee preferences in the same model as expertise and seniority. The exploratory analysis we conducted on the basis of interviews with MPs reveals that the MPs interviewed, irrespective of sex, tend to be appointed to their preferred committee. Hence, if we could include committee preference in the same model, the differences between women and men in SWIC appointments would certainly be smaller. However, our results indicate these supply-side factors do not tell the full story.

The analysis of the interaction between MPs' sex with expertise and seniority addresses an important aspect of the demand-side explanation that, to our knowledge, was hitherto unexplored. It sheds light on how party leaders value MPs' characteristics as a function of gender and test the innovative hypothesis that expertise and seniority are not valued in the same way for male and female MPs. The findings suggest that in Portugal this is indeed the case for SWIC but not for PC. In fact, all senior MPs with the appropriate expertise have the same probability of being nominated to the most powerful committees, irrespective of sex.

However, women are appointed to SWIC even if they are not experts in a related area and regardless of whether they are newcomers or more experienced legislators. In sharp contrast, the right expertise is indispensable for a man to be appointed to a SWIC committee and senior male MPs are appointed to SWIC significantly less than senior female MPs. This leads us to believe that the stereotypes of female and male politicians (Herrnson et al., 2003) are still influential. As it was not possible to make a similar analysis for MPs' preferences, we cannot say whether the MPs' sex affects the consideration given to preferences by party leaders. Notwithstanding, as the MPs interviewed do not report signs of marginalization,²⁰ the observed difference in SWIC appointments is more likely to be the product of self-selection by female legislators than of direct marginalisation by party leaders.

²⁰Although this result should be confirmed through a survey applied to a representative sample of legislators.

This emphasis on supply-driven factors must be considered with caution since the gender norms embedded in political institutions (and in society) shape the dynamics of both demand and supply factors (Kenny, 2013, p. 13) and hence the MPs' expertise and preferences are themselves also influenced by these norms (Lovenduski, 2005; Kenny, 2013).

This case study is of relevance both to confirm and generate hypotheses. It places Portugal in the broader comparative literature on women's assignments to committees and observes some trends described in previous research. More specifically, even though committee appointments are not gender neutral, there are signs of change (Baekgaard and Kjaer, 2012; O'Brien, 2012; Kerevel and Atkeson, 2013; Barnes, 2014) and neither the growing percentage of women in the legislature nor the implementation of gender quotas have had negative consequences (Kerevel and Atkeson, 2013). Moreover, this study confirms that although the emphasis on party control over the electoral mandate typically given in CLPR systems is also found in Portugal, MPs' preferences are taken into consideration; it thus supports prior research highlighting the fact that individual MPs are increasingly relevant in Portugal (Leston-Bandeira, 2004; Fernandes, 2016; Fernandes et al., 2018).

This article introduces a promising avenue of research in women's committee appointments by suggesting that party leaders do not always perceive the characteristics of male and female MPs, e.g. expertise and seniority, in the same way and that this has important consequences for gender balance. Incorporating the interaction between individual-level characteristics and MP's sex when explaining committee appointments might reveal that previous studies attributed excessive weight to supply-side factors, e.g. women's incumbency disadvantage and committee preferences. In fact, the inequality observed in committee assignments might be partly explained by political actors' tendency to place more (less) emphasis on some women's characteristics over others, and this is a demand-side factor. Given the dominance of case studies in this field, future research would also benefit from comparing committee appointments in countries with similar levels of female representation in parliament and similar institutional designs.

Supplementary data

Supplementary data are available at *Parliamentary Affairs* online.

Acknowledgements

A previous version of this article was presented at the 111th Annual Meeting APSA 2015 (San Francisco, USA, 3–6 September 2015). We would like to thank Matthew Shugart and Kaare Strøm for valuable suggestions and Rachel Evans for revising the English.

Funding

This article was supported by the National Science Foundation, USA through SES-0751662 (Ellis Krauss and Matthew S. Shugart co-PIs) and SES-0751436 (Robert Pekkanen, PI); by the Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia, Portugal, through PTDC/IVC-CPO/4088/2012 (Nina Wiesehomeier, PI) and through strategic project number UID/SOC/50.013/2013.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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