

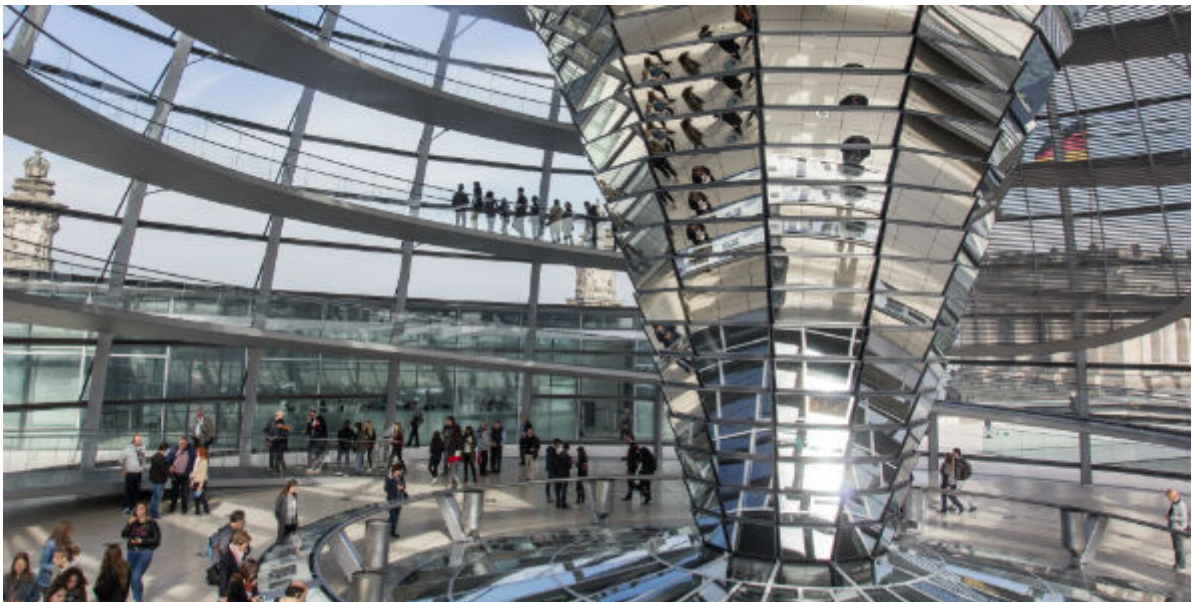
# More women at the top? Why we see variation in local–national gender gaps for elected assemblies

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By Democratic Audit UK

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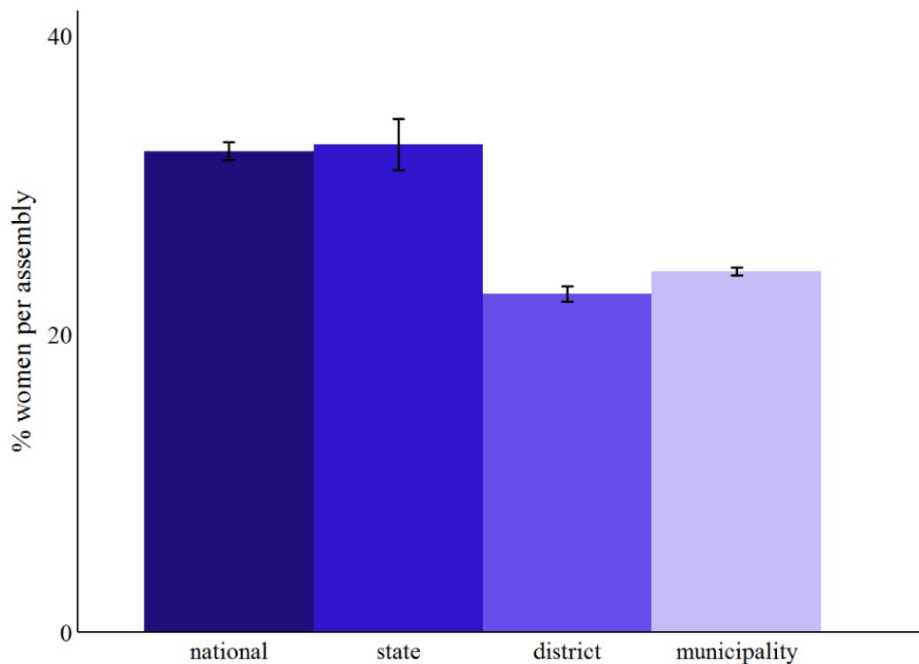
*There is considerable variation in the representation of women in elected chambers between different levels of government, but the differences are not uniform between countries. By examining the unusual case of Germany, where the representation of women is greater at higher echelons, **Jessica Fortin-Rittberger, Christina Eder, Corinna Kroeber and Vanessa Marent** find that the nature of the party system is crucial, in particular the strength of left-leaning and minor parties, which has implications for understanding levels of representation in other democracies.*



Bundestag, Berlin. Picture: [Nikky](#), via a CC BY 2.0 licence

When we compare the presence of women in elected assemblies at local levels of government to their presence in national parliaments, we see, in most cases, marked differences. In many countries, such as Canada and the United States, we find a pyramidal pattern whereby women are more numerous in municipal councils, and scarcest in national assemblies. However, in a handful of cases, such as Germany, we find the pyramid inverted: as can be seen in figure 1, women are most successful at the highest levels of government – in the Bundestag and state assemblies – and become much less visible in lower, more local echelons. The inconstant shape of local–national gender gaps represents an intriguing puzzle for researchers to explore.

**Figure 1: percentage of women representatives at different levels of government (Germany 2000–2012)**



For a long time, researchers sought to explain why women were more likely to be elected to municipal rather than national assemblies. They concluded that barriers to entry into local politics tend to be lower than at the higher levels of government. In a nutshell: ‘the higher the fewer’. If, however, the pyramid is inverted as it is in Germany, this account does not hold. To make sense of the inverted pyramid, others have conjectured the opposite, namely that barriers to entry into politics are highest at the local level. We are therefore facing two competing sets of contradictory expectations. But which one is correct?

In an article recently published in *Government and Opposition*, we argue that existing research on local–national gender gaps overlooks a crucial missing link that can reconcile the contradictory accounts: the different party system constellations across levels of government. In the article, we focus on two characteristics of party systems. The first feature is the performance of left-leaning parties, which are typically more hospitable to female candidacies. The second feature relates to minor parties, which tend to be more issue-centric and face few incentives to balance their tickets. We then looked at how the success of these types of parties systematically varies across levels of government, drawing on a new data set mapping the representation of women at all four echelons of government in Germany, from the national and state level down to the local levels of districts and municipalities from 2000 to 2012.

In Germany, particularly since reunification, the success of political parties varies within, as well as across echelons. The five major German political parties over this time period, namely the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU), the Social Democrats (SPD), the Liberals (FDP), the Greens and the Left party each have their regional strongholds. In the former GDR states, the Left party is rather successful, while it receives fewer votes in the Western states. The SPD traditionally performed best in highly industrialised areas, and the Christian Social Democrats (CSU), the sister party of the CDU, operates exclusively in Bavaria.

**Figure 2: seat share of parties at different levels of government**

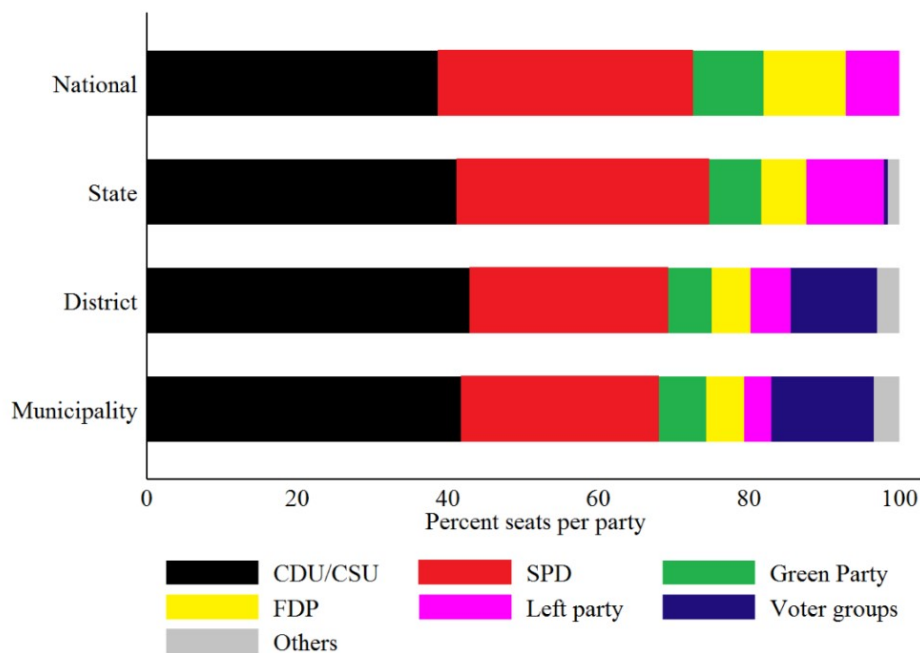


Figure 2 displays the seat share of parties at each of the four German levels of state from 2000 to 2012 and illustrates differences in the party system across levels of government. Minor parties are most prevalent at lower levels and are practically absent at the higher echelons. The five major parties held on average 97.2 per cent of the seats in state parliaments, but only about 85 per cent at the lower echelons. Both the weaker performance of the three left-wing parties, as well as the larger seat share won by minor parties provide compelling explanations for the under-representation of women at the municipal and district level. Since left-wing parties win, on average, fewer seats at the lower echelons in Germany, the assemblies at the district and municipal level consequently feature considerably fewer women. Moreover, women’s representation decreases in environments where minor parties, like voter groups or independent candidates, are strongest, and these types of political formations are most relevant in local politics. As a result, the relative weakness of left-wing parties and strong minor parties at the lowest echelons decrease women’s representation at these levels of government in Germany and spin the pyramid of representation on its head for 2000–2012. The 2017 election, albeit not included in this analysis, seems to be case in point. The historically weak result of the SPD, combined with the entry of the extreme right party AfD (Alternative for Germany) into the Bundestag, have shifted the proportion of women from 37% in 2013 to 30.9%, which is back to 1998 levels.

Although the analyses we present focus on Germany, we think that variations in party system constellations have the potential to account for the inconsistent patterns of women’s representation researchers have observed in other democracies. Our findings open up several avenues for future research, one of which would be to assess the relevance of differences in the party systems in a cross-country comparison in order to further establish the generalisation potential of our results. Second, fine-grained analyses

of recruitment patterns would help to clarify the causal link explaining why left-wing parties are so important for women's representation, even at the lowest echelons, where factors such as quotas lose some of their explanatory power.

*This article represents the views of the authors and not those of Democratic Audit. It draws on the authors' article '[How Party Systems Shape Local-National Gender Gaps](#)' published in *Government and Opposition*.*

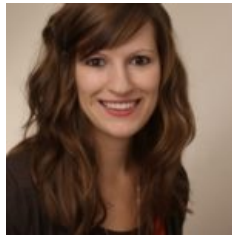
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