

**European Parliament's elections 2019:
towards parity democracy in Europe**

Written by A. Irigoien

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the European Union (EU) is facing new and old challenges, it is crucial to reflect on what the EU really needs to reinforce its legitimacy and comply with its democratic foundations. The EU stands now as a democracy that grants the same formal rights to both men and women. However, flagrant gender inequalities persist in Europe. While half of the population is female; women are systematically under-represented in power decision-making positions in most fields, including in Parliaments, the democratic institutions *par excellence*. In this light, parity democracy, which first emerged on the EU agenda in the early nineties, comes as a necessary next step in the European project to strengthen democracy and adopt an approach that makes gender equality effective and sustainable.

This policy paper aims to reconsider the concept of parity democracy in the current EU context and focusing on the upcoming elections to the European Parliament (EP) in May 2019. As developed in the *Athens Declaration*, adopted at the *European Summit of Women in Power* in 1992, parity democracy stands on different arguments which are recalled and updated with a view to informing EU citizens and influence stakeholders for greater gender balance in the EU as a way to consolidate democracy.

The **concept of parity democracy** does not limit itself to increasing the number of women in politics, decision-making positions and democratic bodies, but it entails a transformation of our understanding of democracy, political culture and structures, and a true embracement of equality between women and men as a fundamental principle and right in which a democratic system is based. Parity democracy is both a concept and a goal which aims to acknowledge the equal value of women and men, their equal dignity and their obligation to share rights and responsibilities.

Why parity democracy is important to the EU?

- **Stand with EU's values:** gender equality is a founding principle and an official goal of the EU. The EU not only has a legitimate right to stand and fight for it, but also a moral responsibility to do so.
- **Strengthen EU's democracy:**
 - **By addressing the democratic deficit:** the functioning and legitimacy of the democratic system are put under question if half of the population is persistently under-represented.

- **By increasing diversity:** parity democracy aims at transforming democracy by including all women in their diversity and creating an inclusive framework, necessary to better represent all EU citizens.
- **By challenging populism and far right:** as the EU needs to face waves of populism and other waves, (such as terrorism and increased inequalities) that threaten the acquired peace and prosperity; gender equality is a bastion against extremism.
- **Obtain strategic gains:** women represent half of the talent, knowledge, skills, ideas, creativity... Including women means that neglected or new issues will be introduced to the EU political agenda and that more inclusive and effective policies will be adopted. Political parties can also increase electoral benefits.

Not only parity democracy is important to the EU, but also the **EU and parity democracy are important for women and women's rights**. The EU has been and is currently shaping women's rights and adopting measures that deeply affect women's lives. The EU has pursued gender equality policies for more than 50 years, establishing legislation jurisprudence, statistics, action plans and programmes and an important institutional anchoring which operate as a lever for national policies. It has also adopted the principle of gender mainstreaming and its transformative potential to build its policies.

What is the current state of gender balance in EU decision-making and the EP?

Currently, only 37% of Members of the EP are women, slightly more than the average across EU National Parliaments where only 30% of Members of Parliament are women. The data provided by EIGE¹ shows the persistent and troubling under-representation of women in political positions, as well as large disparities across member states. The current gender imbalance in the EP cannot be disassociated from the systemic under-representation of women in the whole political decision-making apparatus of the EU. To tackle gender imbalance, concrete steps which are proven to impact on the resulting composition of the Parliament need to be reconsidered and implemented in the EU and across its member states. Those steps relate inter alia to:

- Gender quotas,
- Proportional electoral systems
- The role of political parties
- Greater women aspirants
- Fairer media representation

¹ The European Institute for Gender Equality based in Vilnius keeps an updated data base on women in decision making in the EU and EEA member states

With regards to **political participation**, the turnout to the EP elections has continuously decreased since first elections were held. We observe that more men than women vote and that in the last elections in 2014, the gap between men and women's turnout widened. In the same line, the results of the last Eurobarometer showed that women are less interested in and less satisfied with the EU, than men. These results indicate that the EU is failing to effectively address the needs of a big part of its citizens.

At the same time, there are **current challenges and opportunities** with regards to achieving greater gender balance in the EP's elections in May 2019. Some of the challenges refer to the rise of populist and far right parties which are characterised by its anti-democratic, anti-EU and anti-gender ideology, and to the gender stereotypes that still prevail in EU citizen's minds, as the results of the 2017 *Special Eurobarometer on gender equality* showed. On the contrary, the current EU political context also provides opportunities to foster gender balance and equality: the commitments done by the EU (which need to be translated in reality), the renewed civil society movements for gender equality and the introduction or modification of electoral quotas in some member states.

Finally, the paper provides some **recommendations** to move towards parity democracy in the EU and seize the opportunity of the EP's elections in May 2019, as well as broader recommendations to strengthen EU gender equality policies and their impact.