Problemy Polityki Społecznej 2020, 48(1): 73–91
https://doi.org/ 10.31971/16401808.48.1.2020.5

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"It's not just a matter of increasing numbers!" Advancing women's political representation in quota-adopting countries[2]

Abstract

Electoral gender quotas are among the most contested policies worldwide. A common criticism is that quotas promote undeserving women and therefore undermine the meritocracy. Although criticism persists, paradoxically, it has rarely been subject to empirical testing in Central and Eastern European countries. The objective of the present study is to address this gap by examining the characteristics of a randomly selected sample of 410 representatives in the local councils of Albania. By comparing the councillors across demographic characteristics, political experience, and ties in politics, I show that quotas have promoted a diverse group of women, who, compared to men,

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[2] Special acknowledgments go to the Women's Network Equality in Decision Making in Albania and the research team. Data collection was funded by United Nations Development Programme — Albania, contract number ALB-092-2016. The article was written while the author held the Marie Curie Fellowship at Uppsala University. The fellowship was funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 792969.

are more educated, younger, and more likely to live in rural areas. While the practice of relying on family or kinship ties to advance in local politics is more common among women than among men, differences were not found between women promoted through gender quotas and their non-quota female colleagues. The present findings call into question the assumptions that surround gender quotas, suggesting greater use of evidence to challenge popular perceptions and beliefs.

Key words: women's descriptive representation, quota-adopting countries, CEE countries, Albania

Introduction

Over the past two decades, women's participation in national parliaments across Europe has increased twofold, reaching 27% (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018). In large part, the increase in women's presence in politics is attributed to electoral gender quotas, "a fast track policy" intended to address women's underrepresentation in politics (Dahlerup, 2018). The adoption of gender quotas has challenged the assumption that women's social and economic status is a precondition for their numeric representation in politics. Countries with traditional gender regimes have made historical leaps as women's numbers in politics have increased substantially.

To date, 15 Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries have adopted gender quotas (Vojvodic, 2019). Quota adoption has been part of greater democratization reforms, supporting the transition to post-communism. The initial efforts were met with strong resistance, which led to quota legislation — even when enacted — remaining on paper or resulting in marginal changes (Antić & Lokar, 2006). Building on this experience, women's rights advocates have proposed changes to quota regulations, for instance increasing the quota threshold and sanctions for party non-compliance (Dahlerup & Gaber, 2017).

The adoption and implementation of gender quotas is at the same time applauded and criticized. Proponents of gender quotas argue that quotas will promote new models of political leadership, advance women's interests, enhance the quality of government, and more broadly promote justice in politics (Dahlerup, 2018; Phillips, 1995). On the other hand, quotas are criticized for promoting unqualified women and therefore undermining the meritocracy (Bylesjö & Seda, 2006; Dahlerup, 2018). Being a quota-elected woman is often associated with stigma or a "label effect" (Franceschet & Piscopo, 2008). Numerous scholars draw attention to the issue that political leaders in authoritarian and post-authoritarian regimes use gender quotas to advance their agenda, such as enhance their reputation in the international community or shift attention from corruption scandals, rather than support women's political empowerment (Bjarnegård et al., 2018; Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2019; Bush, 2011; David & Nanes, 2011; Nistotskaya & Stensöta, 2018; Valdini, 2019).

A growing body of research has addressed the concern that quotas undermine the meritocracy by examining the characteristics of women promoted through gender quotas

in diverse contexts, such as Latin America, Western Europe, and Africa. While some studies have challenged the assumption that quota-elected women are less qualified and politically experienced than men are (Beer & Camp, 2016; Nugent & Krook, 2016), others have raised the concern that quotas reproduce clientelism because they promote women who have close ties to political leaders (David & Nanes, 2011; Sater, 2012).

In the present study, I focus on the characteristics of women promoted through gender quotas in the local councils in Albania. Albania adopted gender quotas in 2008 but it was only in 2015 — after amendments to the Electoral Code — that women's representation in local councils increased significantly, reaching 34.80% (Central Election Commission, 2015). Currently, Albania is one of the ten European countries with the highest percentage of women in local councils (Council of European Municipalities and Regions, 2019). The Albania case provides the opportunity to study local representatives' characteristics in a context where the implementation of gender quotas has resulted in a significant number of women in local politics. In the present study, I draw on a national survey conducted with 410 local representatives one year after the adoption and implementation of gender quotas. One of the advantages of the survey design is that it allows comparisons across multiple groups. To gain in-depth insights into the characteristics of women promoted through gender quotas, these women were compared with their (non-quota) female counterparts and men.

The analysis shows that gender quotas have promoted a diverse group of women who, compared to men, are more educated, younger, and more likely to live in rural areas. It also shows that women promoted through gender quotas are more likely than men are to rely on family or kinship ties. The practice of relying on close ties, however, is common to all women, not only those promoted through gender quotas: a finding that underscores the importance of focusing on the structural barriers that women politicians face rather than on questioning the gender quotas.

The Albania case study provides broader lessons about CEE countries. Despite the differences, CEE countries share the communist legacy of state feminism (Dahlerup & Gaber, 2017; Rashkova & Zankina, 2017). Women's representation in politics declined dramatically after the fall of communism, and since then it has been difficult to reverse the trend (Chiva, 2018). Quotas did not gain much political support in the early years of post-communism; however, the situation gradually changed (Dahlerup & Gaber, 2017). Gender equality in the CEE region is mostly viewed as a "women's issue," and anti-feminist sentiments persist (Antić & Lokar, 2006; Dahlerup & Gaber, 2017). On the other hand, the development trajectories of CEE countries differ in significant ways. Their quota policies (e.g., candidate quotas, reserve seats), the timing of quota adoption, the strength of women's movement and incentives for quota adoption — EU accession among the most important incentives — differ as well (see Rashkova & Zankina, 2017; Vojvodic, 2019).

While numerous studies have focused on the importance of promoting greater numbers of women in politics in the CEE region, little attention has been paid to the post-adoption phase. Perceptions and beliefs that assign women a subordinate role in politics do not automatically change when women's numeric representation improves. Indeed, they persist, justifying practices of marginalization and discrimination aimed at women (Krook, 2016).

Unfounded perceptions and beliefs can undermine future efforts to advance gender equality reforms (Dahlerup & Gaber, 2017). Discussions informed by evidence are important, especially in contexts in which quota adoption is met with strong resistance. More broadly, a better understanding of the post-adoption phase has implications for local, national, and international actors involved in the process of quota adoption and implementation.

Gender quotas and women's descriptive representation in politics: Theoretical expectations concerning women's characteristics

The literature on women's descriptive representation in politics is divided into two strands. The first strand focuses on the impact of quotas for women's numeric representation — examining barriers to and preconditions for effective quota adoption — and the second strand on the characteristics of women elected through gender quotas (Franceschet et al., 2012). In the present paper, I focus on the latter.

The politics of presence theory (Phillips, 1995) underscores the notion that the representatives' gender affects their actions as office holders. Women bring in politics alternative ideas and, further, push for changes that advance women's interests. Because of the structural disadvantages they face, women play a critical role in addressing issues such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, unequal division of household labour, and the gender pay gap (Celis, 2006; Phillips, 1995). The impact of women's presence, however, depends on their characteristics, among others. One of the reasons why it is important to study the characteristics of representatives is that these characteristics serve as indicators of their actions (Pitkin, 1967). Further, asking what kind of representatives quotas promote has broader implications for our understanding of political representation, that is, whether quotas promote the inclusion of diverse socio-economic groups.

Gender quotas can be broadly defined as formal rules introduced to increase the number of women in politics. Institutional theory suggests that the characteristics of women promoted through gender quotas will reflect conflicts over the distributional effects of quotas (Knight, 1992). Changes in formal rules that threaten the status quo of political leadership will be met with resistance. When confronted with policy changes, political leaders will act strategically by utilizing those strategies that maintain or enhance their political power (Acemoglu et al., 2005). The idea that political leadership acts strategically has found wide application in the gender quota literature. Political leaders draw on informal rules and norms to recruit women who, in their opinion, will not challenge the status quo. Hence, the characteristics of quota-elected women may reflect the party leaders' strategic decisions. One strategy, found in diverse contexts (e.g., Argentina, Morocco, India, Mexico), is to recruit the wives and daughters of male elites (Franceschet & Piscopo, 2008; Krook, 2016; Sater, 2012). This strategy is also found in the local Albanian councils. A study conducted before the local elections of 2015 found that political leaders mobilize kinship ties to recruit women in local councils (Dauti, 2017). Another strategy is to recruit women who are inexperienced in politics (Zetterberg, 2008). These strategies, however, can be viewed in another light. Women's lack of experience may also reflect their newcomer status in politics. Gender

quotas open up spaces that have traditionally been dominated by men or, in other words, spaces where women have not had opportunities to gain experience. Similarly, women's reliance on ties may be critical to their advancement in politics. Ties are instrumental in accessing the political elite and breaking into the informal networks where opportunities and resources are distributed (Beer & Camp, 2016).

Given the role of family and kinship ties in Albanian politics (Dauti, 2017; Krasniqi, 2017), I anticipate that there will not be differences between women elected through gender quotas and their (non-quota) female counterparts concerning their reliance on ties. Family and kinship ties will facilitate access to local councils for both groups. Further, I expect that the substantial increase of women's numeric representation in local councils in 2015 — an almost threefold increase — has led to a cohort of women who are less likely to be politically experienced than men.

The literature on gender roles and socialization provides further insights into women's characteristics. Drawing on this literature, the expectation is that women will join councils from sectors that are traditionally considered to belong to the "women's domain," reflecting the gender division of labour in society (Beer & Camp, 2016). While what constitutes the "women's domain" varies by context, it is often the case that women have a background in education and social services (Beer & Camp, 2016; Franceschet & Piscopo, 2008). I anticipate that the majority of women in the Albanian local councils of will have a background in education. Yet it is open to question whether gender quotas challenge this pattern and promote greater diversity. In other words, whether both groups of women — promoted and not promoted through gender quotas — have diverse professional backgrounds and, further, whether they differ concerning other characteristics such as education level and age.

Most studies on gender quota adoption in CEE countries have focused on the preconditions for effective adoption and variations in adoption across countries (see, e.g., Dahlerup & Gaber, 2017; Rashkova & Zankina, 2017; Vojvodic, 2019). To my knowledge, previous studies have not examined the characteristics of women promoted through quotas, that is, whether these women differ from their non-quota female counterparts and men. A study conducted among councillors in Macedonia found that women had higher levels of education than men. Further, women were more likely to have a family member who held political office (Korunovska et al., 2015). The study, however, did not differentiate between quota and non-quota female representatives.

The present study makes the following contributions to the literature on gender quotas in the CEE region: First, it shifts the focus of discussion to the post-adoption phase, emphasizing the importance of using evidence to question and rethink perceptions and beliefs concerning gender quotas. Second, it sheds light on one of the most understudied aspects of women's descriptive representation — the characteristics of women promoted through gender quotas — thereby contributing to theories of women's representation and institutional change. Third, it seeks to connect evidence on women's descriptive representation in the local councils of Albania with larger debates on quota adoption in CEE — a region where gender backlash has been on the rise during recent years (Rawłuszko, 2019).

Studying gender quotas and women's descriptive representation in the local councils of Albania

Albania's history as regards gender quotas goes back to the communist period. To eradicate inequality, the Eastern Block introduced quotas for different groups, such as women, workers, and youth (Rashkova & Zankina, 2017). Gender quotas, however, did not apply to the highest levels of decision-making. Further, efforts to promote gender equality did not extend to the private sphere. Women continued to bear the burden of household and childcare responsibilities (Çuli, 2000). Women's gains in politics diminished after the fall of communism. In the early 2000s, Albania had the lowest percentage of female parliamentarians in the Balkan region, only 5.7% (Antić & Lokar, 2006).

The second wave of gender quotas began in 2008. The Law on Gender Equality (2008) determined that equal political representation is achieved when each gender has a representation of at least 30% in decision-making. Only a few months later, the Electoral Code (2008) established that 1 in every 3 party candidates must be a woman. Gender quotas, however, were poorly implemented. In the local elections of 2011, women held 12.27% of the local council seats (Dauti & Gjermeni, 2015). The situation changed in 2015, when besides the increase of quotas — from 30% to 50% — a stricter rule for quota violation was enforced. Following the 2015 local elections, women held 34.80% of the local council seats.

Only a few months before the 2015 local elections, a group of women deputies — representatives of the Alliance of Women Deputies — proposed electoral changes in the Parliamentarian Commission for Legal Issues, Public Administration and Human Rights (henceforth, the Commission). While deliberating on the importance of revising the electoral code, one of representatives of the alliance highlighted that "These [the proposed] changes come after a long discussion with NPOs [non-profit organizations] specialized on women's issues, international bodies, OSCE, UN Women" (Commission for Legal Issues, Public Administration and Human Rights, 2015a, p. 39).

Some of the concerns — all addressed by male deputies — were that it was difficult to find women who were interested in politics and that the rule of rejecting party lists for non-compliance with the quota threshold of 50% was "too harsh." One of the strongest opponents characterized the quotas as "political philanthropy." Further, he mentioned that quotas encourage "parasitism" and "vote distortion" (Commission for Legal Issues, Public Administration and Human Rights, 2015b, pp. 4–5). While reading the minutes of the Commission, I found a striking gender difference: while women discussed quotas in relation to gender equality, human rights, justice, and EU requirements, men who appeared supportive of quotas highlighted that they are being *dashamirës* (lit: sympathetic) to their female colleagues. They spoke of their willingness to support quotas, because they were doing women a favour.

While quotas were discussed in public debates, two arguments prevailed. The first argument was that quotas undermine the meritocracy. Quota-elected women were characterized as unqualified and incapable of holding positions of power. The second

argument was that quota-elected women were overly loyal to party members (Erebara, 2015; Kushova, 2015). One common public discourse is to blame women for taking advantage of gender quotas. Some of the scepticism seems to emanate from the notion that the top-down policies of an increasingly authoritarian government lack legitimacy.

Albania has an electoral system of proportional representation with closed party lists. While gender quotas are more likely to have positive effects, numerically speaking, in closed-lists proportional representation systems (Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2010), closed lists increase the control of party leadership over all elected candidates — both women and men. A common practice as regards controlling women has been to replace them with men in the post-election period. The changes made to the electoral code in 2015 prevent such a practice; they require that replacements be made with candidates of the same gender.

Despite the changes occurring after the fall of communism, the traditional division of labour in Albanian households has persisted. A study published in 2016 found widespread support for the belief that "It's better for the whole family if the husband has a job and the wife takes care of the family." The study revealed higher expectations for women than for men as regards sacrificing one's career for the family (Dauti & Zhllima, 2016). Traditional gender norms are also reflected in education. Women are more likely than men to study in the fields of education, health, and welfare; 80.5% of graduates in the education sciences are women. Meanwhile, men dominate the fields of engineering, manufacturing, and construction. The Gender Equality Index in higher education is 1.5, indicating higher levels of education among women. Despite being more educated, women are less likely to participate in the labour market and to hold leadership positions (Instat, 2018).

Methodology

The present paper is based on a national survey conducted with 410 local representatives in 30 local councils — the representative bodies of local governments. The survey was conducted from July to October 2016 — one year after the gender quotas' adoption and implementation.

Thirty out of the 61 councils in the country were randomly selected, and from these 30 councils 440 councillors were randomly selected. An equal number of women and men was selected in each council. The sampling frame was obtained from the Central Election Commission. If the selected councillor was no longer a member (e.g., had found another job in the municipality or left the community), he or she was replaced with a colleague in the same council. Replacement was based on random selection. The final sample included 410 councillors (206 women and 204 men).

A paper-and-pen questionnaire was administered in the selected councils. Fifty-four interviewers (32 women and 22 men) were involved. Being aware of the difficulties associated with reaching out to local representatives in Albanian communities (their contact information is typically not public), interviewers were recruited from the selected council districts. The interviewers met with the councillors at the councillors' workplace, house, or a coffee shop. The instrument was pretested with a group of councillors in the capital.

Councillors were compared across demographic characteristics, political experience, and reliance on ties. To obtain information about demographic characteristics, questions focused on age, education level, participation in training programs (targeting councillors), marital status, number of children, area of residence (urban *vs.* rural), and profession. Questions concerning political experience focused on the number of mandates in the council and the number of years in the party. I sought to capture the role of ties by posing two questions. The first question asked whether the councillors had relatives involved in politics, and the second, whether the councillors had received support from their spouse, relatives, party members, party leaders, or community members during the election campaign.

I drew comparisons between women who were promoted through gender quotas and their (non-quota) female counterparts. The two groups were compared on demographic characteristics, political experience, and reliance on ties. I also drew comparisons between women and men. The examination of gender differences strengthened the comparative focus of the study, putting assumptions concerning gender quotas under greater empirical scrutiny.

Differentiating between the two groups of women — promoted *vs.* not promoted through gender quotas — is nearly impossible in the "secret garden" of Albanian politics. Some of the stories the research team collected during fieldwork revealed that recruitment was often done through phone calls. One of the women, for instance, shared how she was at the hairdresser's when she received a phone call from "someone she knew," asking her if it was okay to put her name on the list. "I hesitated at first," she said, "but my friends encouraged me to say yes."

To differentiate between the two groups of women, I relied on self-reports. Being aware of the "label effect" associated with gender quotas, I was careful in how I worded the question. Specifically, women were asked the following question: "How did the idea of becoming a member of the local council emerge?" Then, they were given the option of selecting one of the following alternatives: (a) I had never thought of becoming a member of the local council, but I was proposed because of the gender quota of 50%; (b) I had thought before about becoming a member of the local council and the gender quota of 50% provided me the opportunity; (c) the desire to be a member of the local council naturally emerged after many years of involvement in politics. A fourth alternative — councillors could introduce a new option — was also included.

Univariate analysis provided an overview of the councillors' characteristics. Bivariate analysis — Chi-square and T-tests — was conducted to draw comparisons between the three groups — women promoted through gender quotas, their female counterparts, and men.

Findings

The majority of councillors had a college education (55.64%), had participated in training programs (54.39%), were married (77.83%), and lived in urban areas (67.97%). An equal number of councillors were teachers (21.64%) and economists (21.64%).

More than 65% of councillors (66.50%) did not have previous experience as local office holders, and 45.12% had relatives involved in politics. The majority of councillors, 75.61%, obtained support from community members during the election campaign, followed by support from party members (51.46%), their spouse (45.12%), and relatives (42.93%).

On average, councillors were 42.26 years old (*SD* = 11.73; *range*: 19–72), had 2 children (*M* = 1.64; *SD* = 1.15; *range*: 0–4), had served 1.58 years in the council (*SD* = 1.01; *range*: 1–7) and 9.34 years in the party (*SD* = 8.03; *range*: 1–35).

Table 1. Councillors' characteristics

Categorical variables	*n*	%
Education level		
High school	50	12.25
College	227	55.64
Master's	102	25.00
Doctorate	29	7.11
Participation in training programs*		
Yes	223	54.39
No	187	45.61
Marital status		
Single	80	20.15
Married	309	77.83
Divorced	5	1.26
Widowed	3	0.76
Type of residence		
Urban	278	67.97
Rural	131	32.03
Political party		
Socialist Party	132	32.20
Democratic Party	77	18.78
Socialist Movement for Integration	91	22.20
Other	110	26.83

Table 1 — continued

Categorical variables	*n*	%
Council member in the past		
Yes	137	33.50
No	272	66.50
Relatives involved in politics		
Yes	185	45.12
No	225	54.88
Sources of support during election campaign		
Spouse	185	45.12
Relatives	176	42.93
Party members	211	51.46
Party leaders	162	39.51
Community members	310	75.61
Other	19	4.63
Continuous variables	M	SD
Age	42.26	11.73
Number of children	1.64	1.15
Number of mandates	1.58	1.01
Number of years in the party	9.34	8.03

* Examples of topics: the organization and functioning of the local council, women's role in decision-making, youth involvement in politics, management of public finances, and gender budgeting.

Source: Author's own calculations.

Women were more likely than men to have a Master's or Doctoral degree. Specifically, 38.72% of women and 25.49% of men had a Master's or Doctoral degree — a difference of 13.23 percentage points. The relationship between gender and education was statistically significant, X^2 (1, N = 410) = 19.49, $p < .001$. There were no statistically significant differences between women promoted through gender quotas and their female counterparts concerning education. Women were more likely than men to participate in training programs for local councillors: 64.08% of women and 44.61% of men reported having participated in training programs. The difference was statistically significant, X^2 (1, N = 410) = 15.66, $p < .001$. The highest percentage of participants in training programs came from the group of women who were not promoted through gender quotas, 69.64% *vs.* 57.45%. This finding is not surprising, given that this group has been in the council for a longer period of time.

The mean age for women (M = 38.86, SD = 11.64) was lower than for men (M = 45.62, SD = 10.84), $t(398) = -6.01$, $p < .001$. Women promoted through gender quotas were younger (M = 36.88, SD = 11.33) than their female counterparts (M = 40.57, SD = 11.68); 33.70% of women promoted through gender quotas were less than 30 years of age. Men were more likely than women to be married. The average number of children for men (M = 1.93, SD = 1.14) was higher than for women (M = 1.35, SD = 1.10), $t(406) = 5.23$, $p < .001$.

While the majority of councillors resided in urban areas, the analysis revealed that women promoted through gender quotas are somehow changing this pattern: 39.36% of women promoted through gender quotas came from rural areas, compared to 26.79% of women who were not promoted through gender quotas and 31.53% of men.

The majority of women were teachers (28%), economists (22%), and lawyers (8%); the majority of men were economists (21.29%), teachers (15.35%), and lawyers (14.36%). The highest percentage of women who were economists came from the group of women promoted through quotas.

Table 2. Councillors' characteristics by group

Categorical variables	Men		Women — quota promoted		Women — non-quota	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Education level						
High school	38	18.63	7	7.61	5	4.46
College	114	55.88	49	53.26	64	57.14
Master's	42	20.59	29	31.52	31	27.68
Doctorate	10	4.90	7	7.61	12	10.71
Participation in training programs						
Yes	91	44.61	54	57.45	78	69.64
No	113	55.39	40	42.55	34	30.36
Marital status						
Single	26	12.94	25	28.09	29	27.10
Married	175	87.06	62	69.66	72	67.29
Divorced	0	0	1	1.12	4	3.74
Widowed	0	0	1	1.12	2	1.87
Type of residence						
Urban	139	68.47	57	60.64	82	73.21
Rural	64	31.53	37	39.36	30	26.79

Table 2 — continued

Categorical variables	Men		Women — quota promoted		Women — non-quota	
	n	**%**	***n***	**%**	***n***	**%**
Council member in the past						
Yes	98	48.04	0	0	39	34.82
No	106	51.96	93	100	73	65.18
Relatives involved in politics						
Yes	68	33.33	51	54.26	66	58.93
No	136	66.67	43	45.74	46	41.07
Sources of support during election campaign						
Spouse	73	35.78	51	54.26	61	54.46
Relatives	83	40.69	44	46.81	49	43.75
Party members	103	50.49	47	50.00	61	54.46
Party leaders	61	29.90	47	50.00	54	48.21
Community members	164	80.39	63	67.02	83	74.11
Other	9	4.41	2	2.13	8	7.14
Continuous variables	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Age	45.62	10.84	36.88	11.33	40.57	11.68
Number of children	1.93	1.14	1.31	1.11	1.37	1.09
Number of mandates	1.90	1.21	1.01	.10	1.48	.79
Number of years in the party	10.71	8.19	4.06	3.95	11.21	8.42

Source: Author's own calculations.

Approximately 34% of councillors reported having served in a local council before 2015. The relationship between gender and previous experience in the council was statistically significant, X^2 (1, N = 409) = 38.64, $p < .001$. 19.02% of women and 48.04% of men reported having been council members in the past. The number of mandates in the council ranged from 1 to 7 ($M = 1.58$, $SD = 1.01$). Men ($M = 1.9$, $SD = 1.21$) reported longer experience in the council than women did ($M = 1.27$, $SD = .63$), $t(408) = 6.61$, $p < .001$. This difference, as anticipated, diminished when comparing the two groups of women — promoted *vs.* not promoted through gender quotas. Women promoted through gender quotas served for shorter mandates.

Men (M = 10.71, SD = 8.19) reported longer experience in the party than women did (M = 8.00, SD = 7.65). The difference was statistically significant, $t(395) = 3.41$, $p < .001$. Women promoted through gender quotas had less party experience than their female counterparts and men. The mean value of party experience for women promoted through gender quotas was 4.06 years (SD = 3.95).

Table 3. Councillors' characteristics by gender

	Women	**Men**	***Chi-square***
Education level			19.49***
High school	12 (24.00)	38 (76.00)	
College	113 (49.78)	114 (50.22)	
Master's	60 (58.82)	42 (41.18)	
Doctorate	19 (65.52)	10 (34.48)	
Participation in training programmes			
Yes	132 (59.19)	91 (40.81)	15.66***
No	74 (39.57)	113 (60.43)	
Marital status			23.18***
Single	54 (67.50)	26 (32.50)	
Married	134 (43.37)	175 (56.63)	
Divorced	5 (100.00)	0 (0)	
Widowed	3 (100.00)	0 (0)	
Type of residence			0.829
Urban	139 (50.00)	139 (50.00)	
Rural	67 (51.15)	64 (48.85)	

Table 3 — continued

	Women	**Men**	***Chi-square***
Council members in the past			
Yes	39 (28.47)	98 (71.53)	38.64***
No	166 (61.03)	106 (38.97)	
Relatives involved in politics			22.79***
Yes	117 (63.24)	68 (36.76)	
No	89 (39.56)	136 | (60.44)	
Source of support during election campaign			
Spouse	112 (60.54)	73 (39.46)	14.30***
Relatives	93 (52.84)	83 (47.16)	0.83
Party members	108 (51.18)	103 (48.82)	0.15
Party leaders	101 (62.35)	61 (37.65)	15.69***
Community members	146 (47.10)	164 (52.90)	5.03*
Other	10 (52.63)	9 (47.37)	0.04

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Numbers in parentheses indicate row percentages.
Source: Author's own calculations.

The relationship between gender and relatives' involvement in politics was statistically significant, X^2 (1, N = 410) = 22.79, $p < .001$. 56.80% of women and 33.33% of men reported having relatives who were involved in politics. The difference between women promoted through gender quotas and those who were not promoted through gender quotas was not statistically significant.

Table 4. Councillors' characteristics by gender (cont.)

	Women	**Men**	***t***	***df***
Age	38.86 (11.64)	45.62 (10.84)	–6.01***	398
Number of children	1.35 (1.09)	1.93 (1.13)	–5.23***	406
Number of mandates	1.27 (.63)	1.90 (1.21)	–6.61***	408
Number of years in the party	8.00 (7.65)	10.71 (8.19)	–3.41***	395

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Standard Deviations appear in parentheses below means.
Source: Author's own calculations.

Women were more likely than men to report having relied on their spouse during the election campaign, X^2 (1, N = 410) = 14.30, $p < .001$. Specifically, 54.37% of women and 35.78% of men relied on their spouse. Women were also more likely than men to report that they relied on party leaders, X^2 (1, N = 410) = 15.69, $p < .001$. 49.03% of women and 29.90% of men reported that they relied on party leaders. The difference between women promoted through gender quotas and their female counterparts was not statistically significant. It was common for women to report that their spouse, father or other family members had run the election campaign for them.

Conclusions and discussion

This paper set out to empirically test some of the commonly held assumptions concerning gender quotas. I focused on the case of Albania — a country that, similarly to several other CEE countries, has now entered the third wave of gender quotas (Dahlerup & Gaber, 2017) — to examine the characteristics of local representatives promoted by gender quotas. The paper is based on a survey conducted with local councillors in 2016 — one year after the implementation of gender quotas. To gain insights into the councillors' characteristics, I drew two types of comparisons: I compared women promoted through gender quotas with their female counterparts and men on demographic characteristics, political experience, and reliance on ties.

The first conclusion is that women as a group are more educated than men: women are more likely to have a Master's or Doctoral degree. Women elected through gender quotas do not alter this pattern: They are just as likely as their female counterparts to have a Master's or Doctoral degree. Hence, the argument that women promoted through gender quotas are not qualified did not find empirical support. This finding corroborates the results of previous studies, which show that women politicians have higher levels of education than men do (Beer & Camp, 2016; Korunovska et al., 2015).

The second conclusion is that women promoted through gender quotas have less political experience than their female counterparts and men do. The two measures used in the present paper — the number of mandates in the council and the number of years in the party — led to the same conclusion. This finding differs from that of other researchers who reported higher levels of political experience for quota-elected women (Beer & Camp, 2016; Nugent & Krook, 2016). One possible explanation is that political leaders intentionally recruit women who are politically inexperienced, assuming that they will not challenge the status quo (Zetterberg, 2008). But the finding may also reflect women's alienation from politics; hence, their lack of experience — an issue that use of gender quotas seeks to address in the first place.

The third conclusion is that gender quotas have increased the diversity of local representatives — an aspect that is often overlooked in public debates in Albania. Women promoted through quotas are younger and more likely to live in rural areas. Furthermore, they have joined local councils from non-traditional professional backgrounds. As councils have become more diverse, so have the opportunities for greater representation.

The fourth conclusion is that women are more likely to have relatives involved in politics, and to rely on their spouse and party leaders during the election campaign. Similarly, Korunovska et al. (2015) found that women in the local Macedonian councils were more likely than men to have a family member who held political office. The practice of relying on close ties in the local councils of Albania did not emerge with gender quotas; it existed beforehand. This conclusion is further confirmed by the finding that there were no statistically significant differences between the two groups of women, promoted *vs.* not promoted through gender quotas, which suggests that party leaders have scaled up the existing practices of women's recruitment in local politics. Beyond this, the practice of relying on ties speaks to the structural barriers that women politicians face; if women are to access and advance in a male-dominated environment, they have to rely on ties with men and acquire higher levels of education (Beer & Camp, 2016).

The case of Albania highlights the importance of questioning the assumptions that surround the adoption of gender quotas, and further of using evidence to advance women's political representation. To enrich our understanding of women's political representation, I suggest three further areas of inquiry: (a) examining other aspects of descriptive representation that are important to women, for instance, ties with civil society organizations and women's groups; (b) conducting comparative studies on the characteristics of women promoted through gender quotas in the CEE region; and (c) expanding the focus, beyond descriptive representation, to substantive and symbolic representation. A better understanding of quota adoption and implementation will further support the progress of gender equality reforms in the CEE region.

Implications for policy and practice: Looking beyond numbers

The findings of the present study suggest that we need to shift the prevailing approach, which questions gender quotas, in two ways: First, we need to use evidence to increase public awareness of the characteristics of women promoted through gender quotas; they

are highly educated and represent diverse groups of voters. Second, we need to engage in discussions that highlight the importance of questioning the strategies used by party leaders rather than questioning women's backgrounds. The proposed shift requires that women's rights advocates engage more with evidence, i.e., that they use evidence to highlight women's backgrounds and contribution, expose deep-seated beliefs about women's role in society, and publicly reveal the strategies of political parties during candidate recruitment. Further, it is important to reframe the purpose of gender quotas. Gender quotas, as Bacci (2006) suggested, are not a matter of being sympathetic to women, but rather of weakening male privilege in politics. Breaking the reproduction of male dominance in politics concerns weakening control and privilege, which constitutes the very foundation of women's marginalization (and other underrepresented groups) in politics. Women's alliances in local councils can also play a greater role. Their activities can highlight women's contribution as office holders and the obstacles they face. Greater exposure to women's realities, based on evidence, coupled with more discussions can aid in the complex process of changing perceptions and beliefs. Finally, it is important to connect the proposed interventions with larger transformations that are needed in the CEE region; changing the gender composition of representative bodies may have long-term, positive effects on local development. In the words of a study participant — a women's rights advocate: "It's not just a matter of increasing numbers! Our work has just started."

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