5 Gendered Roads to Mayorship in Different Welfare States

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As we have seen in chapter 3 (by Steyvers and Reynaert), mayors are a fairly homogeneous elite group. Compared to the European population they are on the average more highly educated and they are generally male.

Whether this should be seen as a problem or not depends on the observer’s view on gender relations and how one defines gender equality. The theoretical and normative point of departure in this chapter is that a low representation of women in central political positions is a problem indicating that women in comparison to men are under-represented in central power structures. The normative definition of gender equality used here is that gender equality is achieved when women and men exert power to the same degree in all parts of society. A necessary but not sufficient condition for this to come about is that both men and women are represented in society central power structures, such as political institutions.

If, from this normative point of departure, we state that the representation of women must increase, it is of importance to try to understand why men, not women, are chosen as leaders, in this case as mayors, bearing in mind that on the local level mayors are among the highest political leaders. Insight into the logic behind the recruitment process provide a key that might be useful as a tool of future change.

5.1 The welfare state as an indicator of gender relations within a country

One indicator which has been used fruitfully in previous research to predict gender relations within different countries is related to theories of welfare state regimes (Sainsbury, 1996; Lewis, 1992; Esping-Andersen, 2003).¹ The theoreti-

¹ The questionnaire sent out to mayors was drawn up before it was decided that a chapter concerning gender and recruitment should be written. Thus gender theories were not actively used in order to formulate the questions. The theoretical perspectives that can be applied are therefore limited.
ral hypothesis that different welfare state types create variations in horizontal and vertical gender patterns and gender relations within politics, the labour market and households has received strong empirical support during the last 20 years (Sainsbury, 1994; Sundström, 2003; Daly and Rake, 2003).

The possibility for a mayor to exert power and influence policy varies depending on how competence and political authority are divided within the national political system. In some countries a major part of core welfare production as well as responsibility for this production is located at the municipal level, while in others the national and regional levels have a greater responsibility (Putnam, 1993; Sundström, 2003; see also chapter 2 in this book). At the same time the range of state activity, taking effect at local, regional and national levels, is much higher in the former compared to the latter (Lidström, 2003).

European mayors are chosen in very different contexts and work under different conditions both formally and informally. Different conditions are, as we will see, closely linked to welfare state regimes.

The classical point of departure for welfare state theorists is the well-known work by Esping-Andersen’s ‘The Three worlds of welfare capitalism’ (Esping-Andersen, 1990), although many criticise his theoretical concepts and models. Feminist writers have voiced the most severe criticism (Bussemaker and Kirsbergen, 1994; Daly, 1994; Fraser, 1994; Sainsbury, 1996; Siim, 2000). Esping-Andersen’s central concept of de-commodification focuses on whether and how labour-market participation affects people’s ability to support themselves in times of, for example, illness or unemployment. The more commodified a society is, the more people are dependent on market participation for survival. Societies with different decommodification structures create different patterns of stratification, i.e. status relations between groups in society. The greatest problem with the concept of decommodification is that a person first must depend on income from the market in order to be decommodified. Women and men’s relations to and participation in labour market activity differ markedly, as feminist scholars have noted time after time. Several studies show that gender relations cut across the three systems of welfare capitalism because the state-family nexus is different from the links between the state and the market (Hobson, 1990; Sainsbury, 1994).

Common traits in Europe concerning gender relations with regard to women are that their employment rate is lower than that of men, they more often work part time, they earn less than men, they more seldom are leaders in business organisations or in politics, they have the main responsibility for unpaid work both within and outside the home, they more often have interruptions in their labour market participation on account of responsibility for dependents such as children and the elderly, and, not surprisingly, they are poorer than men.