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Addressing Supply-Side Hurdles to Gender-Equal Representation in Germany

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The Problem: Male Overrepresentation in Politics

In January 1919 German women first received the right to exercise both passive and active suffrage at the national level. Three hundred women acted on their right to run for the Weimar Republic's National Assembly and thirty-seven were elected. The

other 91% of the members elected were men (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung 2014). In 2017, 1400 women ran for the Bundestag and 219 were elected (Bundeswahlleiter 2017, 16). While men's share of seats fell to 69%, after a century of suffrage women still have not achieved political parity; in fact, the Bundestag contained a higher percentage of men in 2017 than it did in 2013. This lack of gender-balanced descriptive representation is not unique to Germany, however. In 2017, men occupied 77% of legislative seats worldwide (Interparliamentary Union 2017).

Political scientists have long investigated male political overrepresentation seeking both “demand-side” and “supply-side” explanations (e.g. Norris and Lovenduski 1993). Demand-side factors include both the formal and informal institutions that shape the actions of the “gatekeepers” who select candidates for the ballot. Supply-side discussions focus on the availability of men and women qualified and willing to run for office. This extensive body of research indicates that while both demand- and supply-side factors play a role in women's political underrepresentation, formal institutions – particularly electoral gender quotas – can be created to solve demand-side barriers to gender-equal descriptive representation by requiring gatekeepers to nominate a balanced slate of candidates. However, quotas do not address the supply-side of the equation. It is possible to increase women's descriptive representation in national legislatures – comprised of only a few hundred members in countries with millions of citizens – without solving the problem of male overrepresentation in the earlier phases of the political recruitment process in which candidates are identified and groomed for elective office. Below I elaborate upon these findings and their normative implications. I then turn to extant attempts to address supply-side hurdles to gender-balanced political representation in Germany, problematizing efforts to date and suggesting alternatives.

The Causes: Supply- and Demand-Side Factors

Extensive empirical evidence indicates that demand-side factors play a primary role in women's political underrepresentation in settings like Germany where politically ambitious individuals cannot self-nominate as candidates but instead must be selected by gatekeepers to appear on the ballot. Gatekeepers are often men who are prone to selecting other men from their social networks to run for office; this informal reliance on homosocial capital inflates the number of male candidates (Bjarnegård 2015). Formal mechanisms such as quotas were developed to constrain such demand-driven causes of women's exclusion from politics by requiring gatekeepers to select female candidates; globally, quotas have successfully increased gender balance in elective offices (Franceschet/Krook/Piscopo 2012).

In Germany too, voluntary party promises to include women on party lists have helped curb – but not eliminate – male overrepresentation (Davidson-Schmich 2016). The Greens, Social Democratic Party (SPD), and Left Party all promise gender parity on candidate lists for the Bundestag; the Christian Democratic Union's