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Europe's missing women leaders

The Continent is ripe for upheaval.

By Corinna Horst

Politico EU (15.04.2019) - https://politi.co/2VMfpWz - The European Union has a woman problem. The bloc has never had a female president of the European Commission or European Council. And just two presidents of the European Parliament have been women — Simone Veil, who served from 1979 to 1982, and Nicole Fontaine, from 1999 to 2001. Today, only a little over a third of the institution's members are women.

The upcoming European Parliament election is an opportunity to change that. As political parties ready for an election whose outcome will shape European policymaking for the next five years, we should be looking across the Atlantic for inspiration on how to galvanize voters and vault more women into office.

The U.S. midterm elections in November saw the highest turnout in a century, with more than half of eligible voters casting ballots. The new U.S. Congress includes a record number of women and first-time congressional representatives; it's also one of the most diverse when it comes to race, ethnicity and sexual orientation.

The factors that led to this mass turnout and diverse group — which is largely considered to be a backlash against U.S. President Donald Trump's divisive brand of politics — exist in Europe too.

The political climate across the bloc is increasingly polarized. Euroskeptics and populists are projected to make steep gains in the May election, and there are increasingly deep fissures between member states and Brussels when it comes to the rule of law and the future of the European project.

The Continent, in other words, is ripe for upheaval.

To be sure, a more diverse European Parliament would disrupt the status quo. The institution has long been governed by the same powerful groups, and is set in its ways. Many are afraid that opening the door too wide would, for example, welcome in people set to undermine pro-European policies.

And of course, women are not necessarily better leaders — consider the controversial legacy of Margaret Thatcher in the U.K., or the anti-immigrant rhetoric of France's Marine Le Pen and German far-right leader Alice Weidel.

Research does show, however, that having more women in political parties makes for a more inclusive and balanced policymaking process. Female leaders tend to be consensus-builders who listen, focus on getting results and work across political aisles.

The U.S. Congress bipartisan women's caucus was among the most productive in the past years. And it was a group of female lawmakers in the U.S. Congress who, in 2013, started a bipartisan group whose negotiating framework formed the centerpiece to get the federal government to reopen after a government shutdown.

Just as in the private sector, a Parliament that more accurately reflects its constituents will yield better results. If we want people to believe in the European project's democratic potential and undo a trend of declining turnout among European voters, our election ballots need to reflect the European population more accurately — and that includes helping more women take up seats.

This is in political parties' own interest. By offering lists that are more diverse, they can connect to a broader range of voters and develop a better feel for the needs of their constituents.

They'll also have a greater reach when it comes to developing policies that address the needs of the electorates. Successful policies are the result of healthy debate and multiple points of view; homogenous groups have major blind spots.

Changing the status quo will also hinge on European women being willing to step up.

In the U.S., women were galvanized by Hillary Clinton's loss and the implications of a presidency they saw as undermining crucial freedoms. They realized they had to take action to make sure their voices were heard on the issues that affect their lives most deeply — not only health care and reproductive rights, but also immigration, security and economics.

In Europe, too, women need to be more vocal about what is important to them. There is plenty to worry about: the uncertainty around Brexit; the rise of anti-European, right-wing populism; the unresolved issue of how to tackle migration or reforming the eurozone.

Concerns over these issues have already compelled women to run in the European election — Tina de Meeûs from the Liberal Democrats in Germany, Airis Meier from Estonia's Reform Party and Valérie Glatigny from Belgium's Reformist Movement are all good examples of women MEPs who want to make a difference.

To shift the tone of the debate and the way we tackle major issues in Europe, we need more women to follow in their footsteps.

The takeaways are simple: Parties, put more women on the ballot; women, make your voices heard.