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## RESEARCH

### Framing and feedback: increased support for gender quotas among elites

Mari Teigen, [mte@socialresearch.no](mailto:mte@socialresearch.no)  
Institute for Social Research, Norway

Hege Skjeie, (1955–2018)<sup>1</sup>  
University of Oslo, Norway

Rune Karlsen, [rune.karlsen@media.uio.no](mailto:rune.karlsen@media.uio.no)  
University of Oslo, Norway

We address changes in support for quota policies, with an emphasis on corporate board quotas, among Norwegian elites. Applying theories of policy feedback and framing, we investigate whether changes in attitudes towards quotas correspond to changes in beliefs about the causes behind male dominance. The analysis rests on two comprehensive surveys from 2000 and 2015 of the entire national elite population within ten sectors of society. We found substantial changes in support for quotas and beliefs about the causes for male dominance. The results suggest that even controversial policies can create positive feedback and introduce new interpretations of problematic power dynamics.

**key words** gender quotas • corporate boards • corporate board quotas • gender equality • policy feedback • framing analysis

#### key messages

- Corporate board quotas have a high and increasing level of legitimacy among Norwegian elites.
- There is increased support for corporate board quotas, particularly among male business leaders.
- The introduction of gender-equality policies might curb trends towards the backsliding of gender equality.
- Controversial policies can create increased support and shape a more comprehensive belief about the causes behind male dominance in top positions.

To cite this article: Teigen, M., Skjeie, H. and Karlsen, R. (2019) Framing and feedback: increased support for gender quotas among elites, *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, vol xx, no xx, 1–20, DOI: 10.1332/251510819X15639713867651

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## Introduction

Male dominance in positions of political authority and corporate power is among the most striking signs of unequal gender relations worldwide (England, 2010; Goldin, 2014; Krook and Zetterberg, 2015; Pedulla and Thébaud, 2015). A vast research literature suggest homosocial reproduction (Kanter, 1977), the ‘leaky pipeline’ and ‘glass-ceiling’ effects (Cotter et al, 2011; Matsa and Miller, 2011; Bertrand et al, 2014), and cultural gendered beliefs, stereotypical bias and self-assessment (Correll, 2001, 2017) as important causes for enduring male dominance in top positions. Recently, however, scholarly focus is arguably shifting towards analysing gender-equality policy adoption, implementation and outcome in terms of the potential for gender transformations (Engeli and Mazur, 2018). The recent wave of adoption of corporate board quotas (CBQs) for gender is a case in point. CBQs have become a hot topic in a wide range of European countries, addressing the potential of policies to achieve gender balance in the corporate world (Terjesen and Sealy, 2016; Lépinard and Rubio-Marin, 2018; Piscopo and Muntean, 2018). Indeed, CBQs have been characterised as ‘one of the most important sociopolitical developments of the past 30 years’ (Hughes et al, 2017: 332).

Recent research suggests that the introduction of new policy can have severe consequences for opinions on the policy topic. More precisely, scholars have increasingly focused on how policy can shift agendas, interests and beliefs through so-called *policy feedback* (Pierson, 1993; Soss and Schram Sandford, 2007; Campbell, 2012). We know that quota policies often succeed in fixing numbers in the contexts where they are applied (Hughes et al, 2017; Piscopo and Muntean, 2018). In addition, studies have reported that quotas are sometimes perceived as controversial and produce backlash and resistance (Hughes et al, 2015; Krook, 2016), but at other times bring about positive reactions (Franceschet et al, 2012; Pande and Ford, 2012; Arnardottir and Sigurjonsson, 2017). For example, Wiersma and Mors (2016) argue that perceptions of quotas are more positive in countries that have adopted them and more negative in countries that have not adopted them. However, to our knowledge, detailed analysis of attitudinal reactions to gender quotas is lacking (but see Teigen and Karlsen, 2019).

In this article, we make two main contributions to the body of literature on the implementation and consequences of gender quotas. First, using unique data on the entire national elite in Norway, we investigate how the introduction of CBQs has influenced elite opinion on the matter. More specifically, we study changes in support for quota policies in general, and CBQs in particular, in relation to changes in beliefs about the causes for male dominance in top positions among national elites before and after the introduction of CBQs. Norway is of particular interest in this regard as it was the first country to adopt a strictly enforced policy of a 40/60 percent minimum gender balance in publicly owned and traded firms in 2003. We base our empirical approach on two comprehensive national elite surveys carried out in 2000 and 2015. The surveyed elite included, for example, cabinet ministers, editors of large media outlets, Supreme Court judges, bishops and the chief executive officers (CEOs) of the largest companies. The surveys included items designed to measure both support for different gender-equality policies and the respondents’ beliefs about the causes for male dominance in top positions.

Our second contribution is to develop an analytical framework that integrates perspectives from the policy feedback literature and the concept of framing. Inspired

by the framing literature, we make explicit connections between the viable solutions to a problem (CBQs) and the definition of a problem by diagnosing its causes (Entman, 1993; Verloo, 2005; Chong and Druckman, 2007; Verloo and Lombardo, 2007), and argue that the introduction of CBQs can influence both support for the policy instrument (solution) and beliefs about the causes for male dominance. We further distinguish between individualised (for example, too few women apply) and institutional (for example, networks and discrimination) causes. By doing this, a major aim of the article is to investigate whether increased support for CBQs corresponds with increased support for institutional causes, resulting in more coherent opinions.

The results show a substantial increase in elite support for quotas, and CBQs in particular, suggesting a clear positive policy feedback effect. Moreover, we find a clear cognitive change in beliefs about the causes for male dominance as increasing numbers of elites emphasised institutional causes. These changes corresponded to a change in the support for CBQs, resulting in what we label ‘strong institutional frames’. The results strongly indicate that the introduction of CBQs has contributed to elites having a more comprehensive opinion about the causes for male dominance in top positions. In conclusion, we therefore suggest that the implementation of gender-equality policies might curb trends towards backsliding of gender equality in policy and practice.

### **Policy feedback in the analysis of gender-equality policies**

The policy feedback literature departs from the simple claim, attributed to Schattschneider (1935: 288), that ‘new policies create a new politics’. Policies are seen as political forces that may themselves set agendas, shift interests and change beliefs (Pierson, 1993). Feedback consists of complex input–output interplays (Kumlin and Stadelmann-Steffen, 2014) in which new policies contribute to changing agendas, identities and interests, and policy feedback research has shown that not only are policies produced by politics, but they also shape and change attitudes and political opportunity structures (Thelen, 1999; Pierson and Skocpol, 2002; Campbell, 2012). Gender quota studies have increasingly investigated the effects of quotas on the performance of decision-making bodies and the broader mobilisation of potential and attitudinal changes (Hughes et al, 2017). Of interest, then, are not only positive feedback processes, which contribute to strengthening and locking in place new policies, but also negative feedback processes, which work to maintain the status quo (see Walby, 2009: 85–6).

Originally, policy feedback was studied at the level of political elites. In recent years, a growing literature has focused on the relationship between policymaking and mass public opinion (Campbell, 2012). Soss and Schram Sandford (2007) investigated whether governing elites can be expected to use policy actions to reshape attitudes. They concluded that welfare reforms have minimal effects on mass opinion and argued that policy feedback is highly contingent on policies’ visibility and proximity (Soss and Schram Sandford, 2007). Visibility concerns the degree to which a policy is salient (Hacker, 2002), and proximity concerns the extent to which a policy affects people in immediate, concrete ways (Soss and Schram Sandford, 2007: 121). In studies on gender-equality policy formation, feedback theory presents a fruitful perspective on implementation effects. For example, Ellingsæter et al (2016) show how changes in publicly financed childcare changed attitudes from conditional support

for institutional childcare to institutional childcare being considered the best form of care for preschool-aged children.

In the context of CBQs, the attitudes of the business elite are of special interest as gender quota regulations directly affect recruitment to the top authority layer of the business hierarchy, and opposition to quotas has been especially strong among the business elite (Skjeie and Teigen, 2003). Studies on reactions to quotas have identified a major conflict between strong protests from corporate representatives and right-leaning politicians, and strong support from representatives of women's organisations, public authorities and left-leaning politicians (Tienari et al, 2009; Chandler, 2016; Teigen, 2018). The implementation of such measures can thus simply confirm or even strengthen opposition. Increased support for CBQs, particularly among the business elite, should therefore be considered evidence for *positive* policy feedback.

The case for policy feedback is strengthened, we argue, when changes in opinions about the implemented policy correspond to changes in how elite groups in general, and business leaders in particular, perceive the causes for male dominance – that is, when the interpretive scheme for grasping the problem at hand also changes. Pierson (1993: 624), in particular, emphasised the interpretive effects of public policies – the cognitive processes that alter the capacities and interests of those affected by the policies. Frame-building and changes in framing thus come to the fore.

### **Framing analysis: causes and solutions**

In framing analysis, frames define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgements and suggest solutions (for example, Entman, 1993). Discursively oriented research on gender-equality policy commonly expects that framing matters in policy development as the presentation of policy problems guides perceptions of viable policy solutions (Bacchi, 1999). In critical frame analysis (CFA), problems are tied to solutions in policy frames, which are understood as 'organizing principles that transform fragmentary or incidental information into a structured and meaningful problem in which a solution is implicitly or explicitly included' (Verloo, 2005: 20; cf Verloo and Lombardo, 2007). Framing theory thus builds on the premise of consistency or fit: certain problem conceptualisations are theoretically expected to fit certain forms of policy proposals. CFA employs the concepts of diagnosis (the definition of the problem and those affected) and prognosis (the proposed solutions and the responsible actors) as a baseline to study and compare conceptualisations of gender equality itself, as well as gender-equality policymaking within and across a variety of institutions, paying particular attention to voice and agency in policy processes (Verloo, 2005). The implied relationship is that certain problem definitions show some solutions to be more viable than others.

#### *Institutional and individualised causes and solutions*

In a framing framework, CBQs are a *solution* to the *problem* of male dominance. The *causes* for male dominance in top positions can, we argue, be divided into two main categories: institutional and/or individualised. Institutional causes are internal to the organisational structure and typically address formal and informal workplace priorities, rules and recruitment practices. Individualised causes are external to the organisational structure and typically address the reasons for variations in the available pool of candidates' qualifications, career choices and notions of psychological barriers

to the exercise of leadership. Institutional and/or individualised causes broadly correspond with the much-used distinction between supply and demand to explain gender disparities. We prefer the ‘institutional’ and ‘individualised’ terminology as ‘supply’ and ‘demand’ arguably signal and have often been used as competing, either/or, causes in the literature (as pointed out by [Gabaldon et al, 2016](#)), and connect causes for enduring male dominance too closely to a market logic and rhetoric.<sup>2</sup>

Institutional causes fit better with support for gender quotas than individualised causes. Gender quotas are formalised rules with clear boundaries and obligatory enforcement by third parties; in new institutionalist terms, they meet the very requirement of an institution (cf [Streeck and Thelen, 2005: 10](#)). We develop a clear-cut typology based on this reasoning (see [Table 1](#)). Elites in support of CBQs can regard institutional and/or individualised causes as more or less relevant, as can elites opposing CBQs. Combining these factors, we obtain four possibilities (see [Table 1](#)) to investigate frame coherence. A shift towards strong institutional frames would represent more comprehensive policy feedback effects (1). A continuous or even strengthened individualised frame would represent opposition or even quota backlash (2). We regard links between diagnosis and prognosis as providing coherent, consistent interpretive schemes; therefore, possibility 1 and 4 are seen to represent strong frames, while 2 and 3 are seen to represent weak frames.

## Data and method: the Norwegian Leadership Studies of 2000 and 2015

Our data comprise two unique comprehensive surveys of Norwegian elites: the 2000 and 2015 Leadership Studies. The Leadership Study 2000 was an important part of the Norwegian Power and Democracy Project, commissioned by the Norwegian Parliament. The 2015 study was mainly a replication of the 2000 study, funded by the Research Council of Norway. Both studies were conducted by the Institute of Social Research in collaboration with Statistics Norway ([Gulbrandsen, 2019](#)). These studies used the so-called positional method to identify elites ([Hoffmann-Lange, 2007](#)). Considerable resources were used to obtain contact information for and ensure accessibility to the elite population. The main mode of data collection was personal interviews based on survey questionnaires with closed response options. The interviewers asked the questions and marked the answers given. The two options for the interview, personal or phone, were chosen for the sake of response rate, not to get more in-depth information from the respondents. The 2000 Leadership Study surveyed the entire elite in ten sectors of Norwegian society ( $N = 1,710$ ). The purpose of both surveys was to examine the social backgrounds and careers of people in the highest-ranked top positions in Norwegian society, as

**Table 1:** Typology: combinations of diagnosis (causes) and prognosis (policy solution: quotas)

	Support quotas	Against quotas
Institutional causes important	1 Strong institutional frame	2 Weak institutional frame
Individualised causes important	3 Weak individualised frame	4 Strong individualised frame

well as their attitudes towards key policy issues, including a series of closed response options on attitudes towards gender-equality policies.<sup>3</sup>

The surveyed sectors were: (1) politics; (2) state administration; (3) cultural institutions; (4) media; (5) business; (6) social partners/civil society organisations; (7) research and higher education; (8) the police and judiciary; (9) military services; and (10) the Norwegian Church. The response rate was 87 percent. The 2015 Leadership Study followed the same design as the 2000 survey. This time, it included 1,351 top positions, with an overall response rate of 71.5 percent.<sup>4</sup> These response rates are comparatively very high, even for Norway.<sup>5</sup> The two surveys provided an overview of the compositions of various elite groups over the 15-year period studied (see Table 2).

The distribution of men and women in the different elite groups changed the most within the Church and research and higher education, followed by the state administration, media and police and judiciary sectors.<sup>6</sup> The business sector's gender composition changed by about ten percentage points from almost total male dominance in 2000. In total, gender balance (40/60 percent) was approached by four elite groups: culture, research and higher education, politics, and state administration.

Frames are typically analysed as embedded in discourse. To our knowledge, attitudinal survey data have rarely formed the basis for studies of the discourse and framing of gender-equality policy (but see Dahlerup, 2018). However, surveys are often employed to investigate the effect of framing, particularly news media framing (for example, Nelson et al, 1997). In a survey-based approach, frames are dimensions embedded in questionnaires. In this analysis of attitudinal data, we were concerned with frames providing 'relatively coherent reasoning in which issue-specific prognostic elements respond to issue-specific diagnostic elements' (Dombos et al, 2012: 5), what we called 'solutions' and 'beliefs about causes'.<sup>7</sup>

We operationalised elite beliefs about the importance of causes using seven commonly claimed causes for male dominance in top positions.<sup>8</sup> The items were constructed to offer a series of choices between the two main types of causes that we identified (institutional and individualised). The three items measuring institutional causes were: 'too much recruitment through informal networks', 'recruitment of women

**Table 2:** Number of surveyed individuals by elite groups and gender, 2000 and 2015

	All		Men		Women		% Women	
	2000	2015	2000	2015	2000	2015	2000	2015
All	1710	1351	1409	970	301	381	17	28
Research and higher education	146	151	118	90	28	61	19	40
Church	107	113	99	82	8	31	7	27
Culture	143	115	98	68	45	47	31	41
Media	116	85	96	59	20	26	17	31
Business	390	242	372	210	18	32	5	13
Organisation/civil society	215	167	164	122	51	45	24	27
Police and judiciary	138	80	123	62	15	18	11	22
Politics	190	141	112	89	78	52	41	37
State administration	197	186	159	120	38	66	19	35
Military	68	71	68	68	0	3	0	4

is not a prioritised goal' and 'discrimination in hiring'. The three items measuring individualised cause perceptions were 'too few women apply', 'many women are less able to handle the pressure of leadership than men are' and 'women's care responsibilities limit their investment in the job'. These theoretical distinctions were supported by factor analysis, which clearly suggested that these six items constituted two dimensions.

The seventh item, 'many men have problems cooperating with women managers', was not as easily classified as institutional or individualised. Conceptually, it was individualised as the causes rested with individuals, not institutions. However, it differed from other individualised causes as the reasons rested with men, not women. This item could be seen to constitute an organisational barrier to women's recruitment, and factor analysis clearly situated it with perceived institutional causes.

The surveys described three gender quota arrangements. All referred to actual policies that were formalised, bounded and enforced, although in different ways by different agencies:

- Gender quota regulations for public boards and commissions
- Gender quota regulations for corporate boards
- Party rules on electoral gender quotas

Gender quotas for public boards and commissions and party gender quotas were in practice in 2000, when the CBQs legislation was in an early preparation stage. The 2000 and 2015 survey questions on party quotas and public board quotas were worded identically.<sup>9</sup> Regarding CBQs, the 2000 question was formulated based on a then-relevant proposal: 'in the boards of private enterprises, should there be a gender composition of, at a minimum, 25/75%?'. In 2015, the question was designed to fit the actual regulation: 'are you for or against the idea that on the boards of traded companies, there should be a gender composition of, at a minimum, 40/60%?'. In 2015, half of the respondents were exposed to information about male dominance in the business elite and the success of CBQs at achieving 40 percent female membership on boards, which was related to another question previously asked in the survey. The information influenced the level of support for CBQs among the respondents. However, this only accounted for a small proportion, three percentage points, of the increase from 2000 to 2015.

## **Empirical analysis**

In Norway, quota policies developed from the 1970s onwards. All the major political parties, except for two right-wing parties and the Greens, have adopted quota rules regarding the composition of internal party bodies and election lists; additionally, legislative quotas have regulated the gender composition of publicly appointed boards, councils and committees at the state and municipal levels. Such rules were introduced in 1981 in Section 21 of the Gender Equality Act, and an explicit demand for at least 40 percent of each gender in state-appointed boards and so on was adopted in 1988. In 2003, the Company Act was amended to include gender quotas for company boards. Although the 40/60 percent CBQ regulation seemed new to the world, in its national context, it was quite obviously, if only partly, modelled on the long-established quota arrangement for public boards (Teigen, 2018).

The framework developed in the preceding sections structure the analysis. First, we investigate policy feedback regarding the *solution*: here, change in support for CBQs.



Second, we examine policy feedback on beliefs about the *causes* for male dominance in top positions. Finally, we explore the relationship between changes in support for solutions and beliefs about causes.

*Increasing support for CBQs*

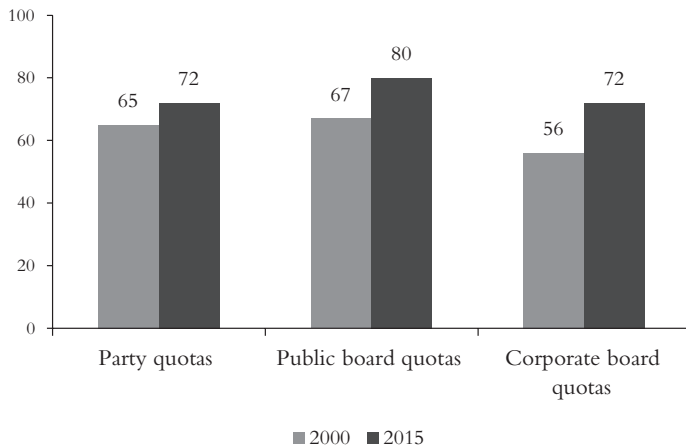
In clear contrast to the often assumed strong opposition to gender quotas, the Leadership Studies showed generally high support for gender quota policies. In the early 2000s, around two thirds of the respondents supported the long-established regulations regarding political party and public board quotas. More than half supported the legislative corporate boards' arrangements then being planned. Fifteen years later, support for clear-cut quota arrangements had become even higher (see Figure 1). Most importantly, the CBQ legislation had a level of support on a par with political party quotas, higher than 70 percent. The issue of CBQs thus moved from its original status as a contested policy (Skjeie and Teigen, 2003) to a widely affirmed policy. The following analysis will zoom in on changes in CBQ support.

*The business elite closes the distance*

Within the business elite, support for CBQs increased by close to 30 percentage points from before the adoption of the legislation in the early 2000s. Even though business leaders also came to better favour other quota measures, attitudes towards CBQs clearly changed the most (see Figure OA1 in the online appendix). Although they remained contested within the business elite, the change was considerable. The increase in support among the business elite, those in closest proximity to CBQs, was greater than in any other elite group (Table 3).

The strong increase in support for CBQs made the business elite group, once an attitudinal outlier in its general resistance to CBQs in the early 2000s, part of a mildly favourable yet internally divided elite group cluster in 2015. With support levels around a moderate 50+ percent level, the business elite, we find, clustered with the traditionally quota-conservative groups of high-ranking military personnel and

**Figure 1:** Proportion of elites supporting gender quota policies, 2000 and 2015



Note: For 2000, N = 1,710; for 2015, N = 1,351.



**Table 3:** Proportion supporting CBQs by elite groups and gender, 2000 and 2015

	All			Men			Women		
	2000	2015	Change	2000	2015	Change	2000	2015	Change
All	56	72	16	51	66	15	83	88	5
Research and higher education	77	85	8	73	80	7	100	92	-8
Church	78	82	4	77	79	2	88	90	2
Culture	68	82	14	63	79	16	78	85	7
Media	60	80	20	54	75	21	90	92	2
Business	29	56	27	29	51	22	44	88	44
Organisation/civil society	59	75	16	52	69	17	80	91	11
Police and judiciary	51	59	8	48	53	5	73	78	5
Politics	69	67	-2	61	60	-1	83	79	-4
State administration	65	83	18	57	76	19	95	96	1
Military	50	52	2	50	53	3	*	*	

Notes: For Ns, see [Table 2](#). \* Too few cases.

the police and judiciary. In contrast, highly positive elite groups included the top bureaucrats in the state administration and in research and higher education, along with the culture, media and Church elite.

Within most elite groups, women were clear supporters of most gender quota policies in the early 2000s ([Skjeie and Teigen, 2003](#)). However, there was one notable exception: support for CBQs among the (very few) women within the business elite was modest. By 2015, the changing attitudes of women in business towards quotas had contributed to extensive changes in attitudes within the business elite (see [Table 3](#)), among whom few rejected such regulations.

### *No rising tide for CBQ support*

The increase in CBQ support among both men and women, particularly within the business elite, supports the case for a positive policy feedback effect as those most positively affected were those in closest proximity to the regulation. However, the substantive changes in CBQ support could be due to the emergence of a so-called 'rising tide' as support for gender-equality policies increases with modernity ([Inglehart and Norris, 2003](#)). In our setting, a rising tide would mean that younger, more quota-friendly generations of people in top positions replaced older, more sceptical generations. The overall change could also result from the changing gender balance in top positions over the past decades as women in the elite have consistently been shown to favour gender-equality policies more than men in similar positions. The cohort analysis presented in [Table 4](#), though, lends little support to this rising tide perspective (cf [Inglehart and Norris, 2003](#)): it was not a new young generation of elites that was behind the increased support for CBQs. In 2000, 58 percent of the cohort born in 1943–57 (then in their 40s and early 50s) supported CBQs; in 2015, 78 percent of this cohort supported CBQs. Among men in the business elite, the increase in the same cohort was even greater, at 31 percentage points (from 31 percent to 62 percent) – quite a substantial increase.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, in 2015, it was clear that the older age groups were more in favour of CBQs than the younger elites. Regarding

**Table 4:** Proportion supporting quotas for corporate boards in age cohort, 2000 and 2015

Born	All		Men in the business elite	
	2000	2015	2000	2015
After 72	–	66	–	25
58–71	51	71	14	47
43–57	58	78	31	62
Before 43	58	–	30	–

Note: Ns: all, 2000 (–42: 214; 43–57: 1,100; 57+: 382); all, 2015 (–42: 120; 43–57: 731; 57+: 500); men in business, 2000 (–42: 49; 43–57: 241; 57+: 80); men in business, 2015 (–42: 12; 43–57: 117; 57+: 79).

attitudes towards CBQs, there was thus no sign of a rising tide, suggesting that the increase was instead a policy feedback effect.

### *Increasing support for institutional causes*

Following framing analysis, we expect the ways in which actors tend to perceive a problem to matter for how they think about, present and prioritise solutions to the problem. CBQs represent an institutional solution to the problem of male dominance in top positions. One important question in terms of framing is thus whether stronger support for quotas is accompanied by a stronger belief in institutional causes for male dominance. We first approach this question through outlining how elites tended to perceive the causes for male dominance and how the weight of different causes changes over time. We next move to close scrutiny of the relationship between beliefs about causes and support for CBQs.

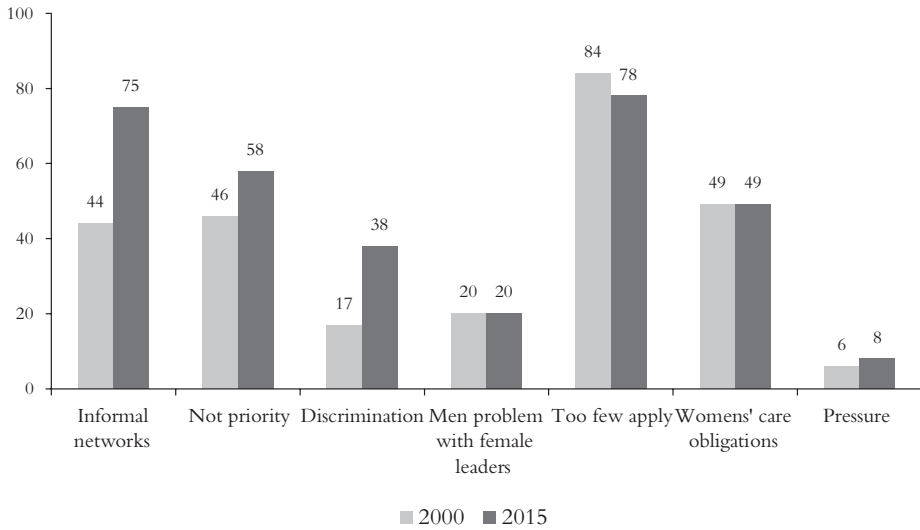
As outlined in the section on data, the Leadership Studies establish a set of questions that we have categorised as indicators of perceived institutional and individualised causes for male dominance in top positions in organisations. In the early 2000s, one cause for male dominance loomed especially large in the elites’ diagnosis: ‘too few women apply’ was met with nearly unanimous affirmation (see Figure 2). Two other causes received little overall support and were shown to have very limited relevance to the elites’ diagnoses: ‘many men have problems cooperating with women leaders’ and ‘many women handle the pressure of leadership badly’. In the institutional perspective, ‘discrimination in hiring’ was similarly shown to have little relevance to the elites’ diagnosis, while ‘too much informal network recruitment’ and ‘recruitment of women is not a prioritised goal’ received moderate support (40–50 percent).

In the 2015 Leadership Study, elites’ diagnosis changed substantially: first, support for the institutional cause ‘informal network recruitment’ increased strongly; and, second, support for the ‘discrimination in hiring’ statement moved from low to considerable. By 2015, ‘informal network recruitment’ began to compete with ‘too few women apply’ as the most common cause (see Figure 2). While there were only limited changes in elites’ support for individualised causes, there was a clear strengthening of overall support for institutional causes for male dominance.

### *Business elite’s support for institutional causes*

The strengthening support for institutional causes was found in the business elite (see Tables OA1–OA4 in the online appendix). The view that ‘too few women apply’ maintained its

**Figure 2:** Proportion that finds causes as important, 2000 and 2015



Note: For 2000,  $N = 1,710$ ; for 2015,  $N = 1,351$ .

**Table 5:** Proportion that finds causes important by gender, 2000 and 2015

	Men		Change	Women		Change
	2000	2015		2000	2015	
	( $N = 1,409$ )	( $N = 970$ )		( $N = 301$ )	( $N = 381$ )	
Informal networks	37	68	31	80	91	11
Not priority	41	51	10	71	75	4
Discrimination	11	29	18	47	59	12
Men problem with female leaders	16	17	1	27	27	0
Too few women apply	85	82	-3	83	68	-15
Women's care obligations	50	52	2	46	44	-2
Pressure	6	9	3	5	6	1

strength but the belief in the institutional causes of informal networks and discrimination in hiring also rose significantly. Otherwise, there was little overall change in the ways in which the business elites diagnosed male dominance, however, holding true mostly among men. More women regarded the cause that ‘too few women apply’ as less important and clearly less relevant than their male colleagues. Overall, the gender gap in diagnoses was considerable. Women granted much stronger support for institutional causes than men, but the gender gap shrank over time (see Table 5). The increased belief in institutional causes (informal networks, not priority, discrimination) was stronger among men than women.

*No rising tide, but the youngest most inclined to support institutional causes*

We have seen that the emergence of a new elite generation could not explain the increase in CBQ support. The pattern was somewhat more mixed for beliefs about causes for male dominance (see Table 6). However, importantly, there was certainly

**Table 6:** Proportion that finds causes important for male dominance by age cohort, 2000 and 2015

Born	Informal networks		Not priority		Discrimination		Men problem with female leaders		Too few women apply		Women's care obligations		Pressure	
	2000	2015	2000	2015	2000	2015	2000	2015	2000	2015	2000	2015	2000	2015
After 72	-	90	-	60	-	47	-	19	-	72	-	58	-	9
58-71	66	75	48	60	24	36	21	19	84	78	52	48	6	8
43-57	44	70	47	58	17	37	18	20	85	80	49	49	6	8
Before 43	32	-	43	-	12	-	15	-	85	-	48	-	8	-

Note: Ns: 2000 (-42; 214; 43-57: 1, 100; 57+: 382); 2015 (-42; 120; 43-57: 731; 57+: 500).

increased support for institutional causes within cohorts. Whereas 44 percent of the cohort in their 40s and 50s in 2000 (born 1943–57) believed that ‘informal networks’ were an important cause for male dominance in 2000, 70 percent thought so in 2015. This cohort also had substantial increase in support for the two other institutional causes. However, the youngest group was more inclined than the older groups to consider institutional causes for male dominance to be important.<sup>11</sup>

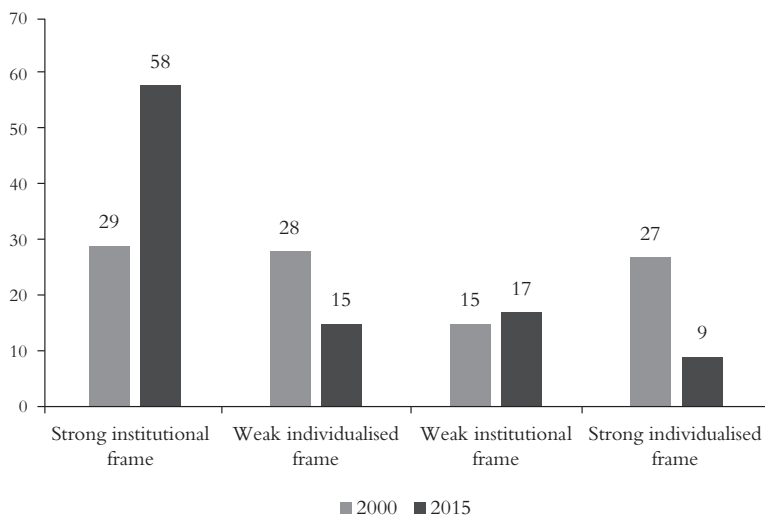
The same type of analysis revealed a very similar pattern among men within the business elite (see Table OA5 in the online appendix). The increase in the belief that institutional causes for male dominance were important was substantial but considerably smaller than in the elite in total. While 29 percent of the cohort born 1943–57 believed that informal networks were an important cause for male dominance in 2000, 41 percent thought so in 2015. Nevertheless, these results also suggest that a policy effect is likely for both the policy in question and for beliefs about causes for male dominance.

### *From weak to strong institutional framing*

So far, we have studied support for solutions and beliefs about causes for male dominance separately. Now, we turn to the relationship between them. To investigate whether the increased support for CBQs was related to stronger support for institutional causes, we used the presented typology of the potential combinations of strong and weak policy framings (see Table 1). In this analysis, we studied the total movement of the elite population over time, asking if there was a shift towards more elites supporting quotas *and* considering institutional causes to be important. We use ‘informal networks’ to illustrate the movement from 2000 to 2015 (see Figure 3).

Overall, the analysis of frame change showed movement in CBQ support and causes: strong institutional framing increased substantially, while strong individualised framing decreased. Elites both increasingly supported CBQs and increasingly believed

**Figure 3:** Strong and weak institutional and individualised frames (informal networks and support for CBQs combined), 2000 and 2015



Note: For 2000,  $N = 1,654$ ; for 2015,  $N = 1,311$ .

that institutional factors were important causes for male dominance. In 2000, elites more commonly supported CBQs while believing that ‘recruitment through informal networks’, ‘recruitment of women is not a prioritised goal’ and ‘discrimination in hiring’ were not especially important causes of male dominance. In typological terms, these views expressed weak institutional framing. By 2015, such a combination had become much rarer (see also Tables OA6 and OA7 in the online appendix).

## **Changing frames: discussion and conclusion**

In this article, we have investigated how the introduction of CBQs influenced elite opinion on the matter among the entire elite in Norway. The results show a substantial increase in elite support for quotas, and CBQs in particular. Hence, today, CBQs have a high level of legitimacy among Norwegian elites. As we have seen, the policy scheme enjoys support from more than two thirds of those in the highest-ranked positions in Norwegian society. Over the past two decades, the strongest growth in support for quota policies has been among those at the top of large businesses tied to the new regulations on gender quotas for corporate boards. The business community strongly contested CBQs when they were first placed on the political agenda in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Skjeie and Teigen, 2003; Teigen, 2015). Contrary to strong warnings in the public debate then, our results show that the legal regulation of CBQs has not been met with increased hostility or opposition within groups in proximity to the regulation. Although the business elite is still shown to be split on the issue, approval has nevertheless increased strongly. Moreover, we also find a clear cognitive change in beliefs about the causes behind male dominance as increasing numbers of elites emphasised institutional causes. These changes correspond to a change in support for CBQs, resulting in what we label ‘strong institutional frames’. How to understand the increase in support is the core issue investigated in this article.

To do this, we developed a theoretical framework based on a combination of policy feedback and framing analysis. Policy feedback theory holds that positive feedback processes contribute to strengthening and locking in place new policies as feedback involves cognitive processes that alter the capacities and interests of those affected by these policies (Soss and Schram Sandford, 2007; Walby, 2009; Campbell, 2012; Ellingsæter et al, 2016). As shown in this article, support for CBQs as a tool to promote gender balance has increased considerably since their implementation, and the increase has been especially high among the business elite. These results clearly support the main idea in policy feedback theory that the implementation of a policy affects support for the policy solution, especially among people in close proximity to the policy. Although policy feedback effects may also be negative, the effect is clearly positive in this case.

By applying a framing perspective (Entman, 1993; Bacchi, 1999; Verloo, 2005), we addressed how policy feedback might also include effects on beliefs about causes for male dominance. The results showed little movement and even some decline in belief in what we labelled ‘individualised’ causes. In contrast, all three main institutionalised causes drew considerably increased support. Although women, to a greater extent than men, believe that institutional causes are important in explaining male dominance, the gender gap in beliefs about the causes behind male dominance has clearly decreased over time. This pattern also applies to business, though men in the business elite tend to remain more sceptical of institutional causes. These results support the theoretical

assumption that policy feedback can influence not only attitudes towards a policy solution, but also the wider problem definitions of an issue.

Finally, we presented a theory-derived expectation that fit, or consistency, between diagnosis and prognosis is demonstrated in higher levels of support for perceived institutional causes among those in favour of quotas than among those against them. Such a pattern was demonstrated in attitudinal clusters in the early 2000s and became much more pronounced by 2015. Elites clearly moved to support CBQs and the three institutional causes of male dominance. Following the analysis by [Sealy et al \(2017\)](#) of how the motivation for quota policies is affected by institutional structures (for example, a nation's institutionalisation of gender-equality policies, particularly quota policies), we suggest a complex cause-and-effect relationship: the introduction of quotas is dependent on and simultaneously stimulates belief in institutional causes for male dominance.

As discussed, attitudinal changes in favour of gender quota policies may reflect policy feedback; however, alternatively, they could be a result of the so-called 'rising tide' in which support for gender-equality policies increases with modernity ([Inglehart and Norris, 2003](#)). Overall, there were few signs of a rising tide explaining the increase as attitudinal changes were found across cohorts. Although it is difficult to disentangle the effects of the policy from other types of influence, visibility is a central part of the policy feedback framework: without public attention, a policy can hardly influence attitudes. Arguably, Norway's introduction of CBQs has occurred simultaneously with a general increase in attention to women in business, on boards and in management. The growing attention has been fuelled not only by country-specific developments, but also by the introduction of CBQs in dominant European countries (France and Germany), the influential Davies review in the UK (cf [Sealy et al, 2017](#)) and international and national media debates ([Tienari et al, 2009](#); [Lépinard and Rubio-Marin, 2018](#)). In this context, the observed increased belief in institutional causes for male dominance among Norwegian elites is part of international trends. As CBQs have been introduced in various countries, the tendency towards broader support for institutional causes for continued male dominance across countries could also be due, at least partly, to policy effects. As observed by others, the study of CBQs is still in its infancy ([Hughes et al, 2017](#); [Seierstad et al, 2017](#); [Piscopo and Muntean, 2018](#)). The implementation of CBQs in Norway is a case in point demonstrating how policies affect not only beliefs about the policies, but also wider beliefs about the causes of the problems that the policies are meant to solve. New comparative research on CBQs is clearly needed to unpack the relevance of such feedback effects across elite strata and broader political contexts.

Overall, the analysis suggests that a change in the emphasis of frames as an institutional diagnosis is more coherently paired with an institutional solution, building a strong institutional frame for addressing male dominance. In light of such attitudinal changes, the implementation of gender-equality policy should not be treated simply as the end result of strategic mobilisation processes. Gender quotas research has studied quota effects in performance and attitudinal change ([Franceschet et al, 2012](#); [Pande and Ford, 2012](#); [Hughes et al, 2015](#); [Krook, 2016](#); [Terjesen and Sealy, 2016](#)). We argue that it is equally important to consider the effects of new policies on the conceptual changes that they more broadly encourage. In this perspective, quotas play an important role in the process of change rather than simply emerging as an end product.



Quota policies are generally recognised as highly controversial means to promote gender balance, and in public debates, they are often criticised for doing more harm than good for broad equality agendas. Quotas are seen as antagonistic and thus unproductive. However, the increased support for gender quotas among elite groups in Norway is evidence that quotas can have the opposite effect. Obviously, this finding runs counter to a series of observations on backsliding in gender equality over the past decade. The dismantling of policies in the context of austerity is increasingly stressed in analyses of gender-equality policies in many European countries (Lombardo and Kantola, 2017; Krizsan and Roggeband, 2018; see also Hughes et al, 2017).

The processes and mechanisms of backsliding pose important, new, cross-national research questions. Our results suggest that feedback from adopted policies may create significant obstacles to backsliding as they contribute to new beliefs about the causes of male dominance and thereby introduce new interpretations of problematic power dynamics. We do not wish to ignore the warnings from feedback research that effects can turn out to be both small and short-lived. We are also well aware of the limitations of this study, particularly the narrow scope of the policies investigated and the exclusive focus on the attitudes of elite groups. However, these groups all represent significant strategic actors and important policy players. In this sense, we believe that our analysis has relevance to studies on backsliding. Its main policy message, for now, is positive: highly controversial policies can create feedback in comprehensive opinion change among strategic actors.

### **Funding**

This article has benefitted from funding from the Norwegian Research Council on the project 'Elites and Society' (10008).

### **Acknowledgements**

An earlier version of the article was presented at a seminar at the Institute for Social Research in Oslo. We would like to thank the participants, as well as two anonymous reviewers and the journal editors, for very helpful comments.

### **Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> Professor Hege Skjeie died in October 2018. Although she was ill for several years, her contribution to this article was crucial for its development. We remain indebted to Hege's sharp analytical mind and her commitment to the advancement of the analysis of gender-equality policies.
- <sup>2</sup> However, for a more comprehensive approach, see Gabaldon et al (2016).
- <sup>3</sup> The Leadership Studies surveyed the entire elite population, and were not based on probability samples. Consequently, we do not apply measures of statistical significance designed to test if patterns found in a sample are generalisable to a population (see, for example, Cowger, 1984). However, changes over time and differences between groups should be treated with caution, and we emphasise the magnitude of such changes and differences.
- <sup>4</sup> There were differences in the response rates by sector. The lowest response rates were found in the business sector, where the response rates were 78 percent and 51 percent, respectively.

- <sup>5</sup> In comparison, the Norwegian Candidate Survey of 2009 and 2013, surveying candidates running for parliamentary elections, obtained response rates of 52 percent (Karlsen and Skogerbø, 2015) and 42 percent (Karlsen and Enjolras, 2016), respectively.
- <sup>6</sup> Note that the central positions in research and higher education mapped in this survey were formal top positions. Moreover, note that the top positions within the Church of Norway were included in the survey due to the Church's official standing under the Norwegian constitution.
- <sup>7</sup> Our analysis was thus primarily inspired by the conceptual framework and theoretical expectations of this research approach, and we did not otherwise apply its methodology (see Van der Haar and Verloo, 2016).
- <sup>8</sup> The question was worded as: 'There are several possible causes as to why men continue to dominate top positions in working life and in organizations. Do you think it is a very important cause, an important cause, a less important cause or an unimportant cause?' The respondents were asked to rank the importance of each cause on a scale from 1 (very important) to 4 (unimportant). The formulations of the questions can be found in the online appendix (see Table OA8).
- <sup>9</sup> There exist several arrangements aimed at reducing gender differences in participation in various areas of society. Are you for or against the idea that 'the gender distribution on the party lists to local and national election should be, at minimum, 40/60%'; 'in the nominations for public committees, boards, and councils, there should be a gender composition of, at minimum, 40/60%'?
- <sup>10</sup> We did not conduct a separate analysis for women in the business elite as the number of respondents in each age group was too small.
- <sup>11</sup> In the youngest group, a few elite groups dominated, and the greater belief in institutional cause perceptions may have been due to their elite group affiliation, not their age.

### Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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