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### Linear Trajectories or Vicious Circles? The Causes and Consequences of Gendered Career Paths in the National Assembly

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# Linear Trajectories or Vicious Circles? The Causes and Consequences of Gendered Career Paths in the National Assembly

Rainbow Murray

*Despite 'parity', various factors have contributed to the low proportion of women within the National Assembly. Men and women are still following different career paths to national office, with women facing numerous obstacles along the way. Women are less likely to accede to executive positions in local office, and tend to enter politics slightly later in life, perhaps due to a greater share of domestic obligations. Men are more likely to enjoy fast-tracked political careers, to benefit from strong implantation in their constituencies, and to benefit from alternative routes into politics such as being a suppléant. Once elected, men are more likely to sit on the prestigious parliamentary committees, and have better opportunities for promotion to government. The combination of a later start and reduced power, both within the constituency and in parliament, may explain why women's parliamentary careers tend to be shorter and less distinguished than those of men.*

*Malgré la loi sur la parité, les femmes sont toujours minoritaires à l'Assemblée nationale. Les hommes et les femmes ont des parcours politiques différenciés, les parcours des femmes comportant des obstacles plus nombreux. Celles-ci accèdent plus difficilement à la tête des conseils municipaux, généraux et régionaux. Elles entrent plus tard en politique, peut-être en raison de leurs obligations familiales. Ce sont les hommes qui bénéficient le plus souvent de parcours politiques accélérés, de l'implantation locale ainsi que de la suppléance parlementaire. Une fois élus, les hommes sont plus nombreux à siéger dans les commissions parlementaires les plus prestigieuses et ont plus de chances d'être nommés au gouvernement. Pour les femmes, les carrières parlementaires sont plus courtes et moins prestigieuses en raison de leur entrée en politique plus tardive ainsi que de leur pouvoir limité.*

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## Introduction

Despite the legal obligation of 'parity', women are still far from achieving equal representation in politics, especially in two of the main foci of power: local executive office and parliamentary office (Achin *et al.* 2007, p. 128; Sénac-Slawinski 2008, pp. 84–87). In the National Assembly, women comprise only 18.9% of deputies. The reasons for women's absence from power are multiple, and many are already well documented. For example, the law does not include a placement mandate for legislative elections, allowing parties to place women in unwinnable seats (Achin & Lévêque 2006, p. 87; Murray 2010b; Scott 2005, pp. 127–128). The financial penalties are also too weak to act as a sufficient deterrent for larger parties (Zimmerman 2003). Political parties have struggled to adapt their candidate selection procedures to the demands of parity (Murray 2010b). At the local level, the lack of provision within the parity legislation for executive offices has resulted in women's concentration in lower positions of power (Bird 2004; Troupel 2002). Women's greater presence in some local, non-executive offices may even have served to reduce the value of these offices in favour of more male-dominated arenas of power, such as leadership of departmental and regional councils (Allwood & Wadia 2009, pp. 73–75). Parity has therefore struggled to challenge the male domination of political power. Within this dilemma, the question of male and female career trajectories is an important issue which remains under-explored, and it is on this question that this article focuses.

The linkage between gendered pathways to power and the shortage of women in politics is a question of growing international concern (Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson 2009; Franceschet & Piscopo 2009). Within France, several studies have revealed that women come from different backgrounds to men. Looking at the parliamentary cohort elected in 2002, Sineau and Tiberj (2007) demonstrated that deputies were disproportionately drawn from elite backgrounds, with an over-representation of men (especially older men), members of the higher social classes, and those with more prestigious occupational backgrounds. Parity is proposed as a means of making parliament more descriptively representative, not only through the direct means of feminisation, but also because women come from a wider variety of social backgrounds and tend, on average, to be younger than male deputies. However, this latter observation concerning women's younger age (confirmed by Dewoghélaère *et al.* 2006; Murray 2010a) is based on the mean age of women deputies, which itself is influenced by the fact that women tend to serve fewer terms overall than men, and hence tend to be less well represented in the higher age categories. The notion that women start their careers earlier than men remains unproven, and also runs counter to the hypothesis that women's political careers may be delayed due to domestic burdens, notably the raising of children.

Costa and Kerrouche have further developed the work of Sineau and Tiberj. They observe that women deputies are less likely than men to be involved in political activity outside of party and electoral politics (such as engagement with NGOs and trade unions) (Costa & Kerrouche 2007, pp. 76–77). While women deputies are likely to be university educated, they are less likely than men to hold a higher university degree

such as a PhD (Costa & Kerrouche 2007, p. 43). Women are observed to follow different political trajectories to men, with shorter political careers overall. Women's political careers are less institutionalised than those of men (Sineau 2002), leading Costa and Kerrouche to refer to women as suffering from the 'outsider effect' whereby they remain different to men and struggle to establish themselves on equal terms (Costa & Kerrouche 2009, p. 332). These struggles are reinforced by the growing professionalisation of politicians. Politics is now a comprehensive career path for many of those involved, with most deputies combining national and local offices (*cumul des mandats*). Establishing a stranglehold over local power enables deputies to improve their prospects for re-election and reduce the opportunities for rivals to build up a local power base, thus limiting the prospects for political renewal. These patterns are distinctly gendered, and may hamper the attempts of parity to limit domination by deeply entrenched male political elites. Parity has largely failed to disrupt the concentration of local power in male hands, with women being recruited to less prestigious positions, and with some new recruits being drawn in from outside political parties instead of promoting women within the party (Pionchon & Derville 2004, pp. 103–104).

This article explores in more depth the causes and consequences of political career paths, using an explicitly gendered lens. It focuses in particular on three elements of political trajectories—the timing of political careers, the role of local political power, and the use of backdoor routes into power. The second part of the article then explores the implications that these gendered routes into parliament may have for women's political careers after entering parliament. Finally, the use of parliamentary careers as a springboard to governmental office is considered. As will be demonstrated, the different routes into power for men and women affect women's power, agency and career progression at all levels.

### The Causes of Gendered Political Pathways

Gender affects the lives of men and women in many different ways. French society remains deeply gendered, with women undertaking most domestic work, including housework and childcare (INSEE 2004). This leaves women with fewer opportunities to build their professional careers and engage in public and political life. Women's career paths are hampered both by these time constraints and by women's orientation, from school onwards, into less prestigious subjects and occupations. There is marked gender segregation in different sectors of the economy, with some of the careers that are most conducive to politics (such as legal careers and management positions) being dominated by men. Conversely, women are concentrated in the less prestigious, 'feminised' sectors of the economy, and are more likely to work part time and to take career breaks (INSEE 2008). Although the women who do make it into politics tend to be from elite backgrounds, making them more like elite men than like most French women, they do still tend to be drawn from a wider and more diverse range of career paths than men (Costa & Kerrouche 2007; Murray 2004, 2010a; Sineau & Tiberj 2007).

However, there are limitations to using professional careers as an indicator of political career paths. Many deputies pursue politics as their primary career, either by moving from work as a political aide to work as an elected official, or by a growing involvement in local and then national politics to the point where the original career is abandoned. In addition, the profession declared by deputies on their parliamentary web pages may be politicised, in that they may be seeking to present themselves in a particular light (for example, deputies on the right may be eager to demonstrate their credentials as well-qualified professionals, while communist deputies may be eager to assert their working-class credentials (Achin 2005; Costa & Kerrouche 2007, pp. 46–47)).

The focus on pathways in this article therefore lies with timings and local *enracinement*. The age at which a deputy starts their political career is a strong indication of their overall political trajectory. There tend to be two main pathways into national politics. The first is to build up a professional career, combined with a steadily developing local profile, culminating in election to national office. A deputy following this career path is likely to enter national politics later in life, serve fewer terms in the National Assembly (NA), and regard parliamentary office as the capstone to a political career cemented in multiple office-holding (*cumul des mandats*). The alternative pathway is to pursue politics as a primary career, through work as a civil servant, parliamentary aide, member of a ministerial *cabinet* or similar. Deputies who have followed this route include Jacques Chirac, Laurent Fabius, François Hollande, Ségolène Royal and Michel Sapin. For these deputies, parliamentary careers begin much earlier, with entry to the NA first occurring while the deputy is still in their twenties or thirties. Deputies following this ‘fast-track’ route might begin their careers at the national level, with limited or no prior experience in local politics. However, the advantages of holding local office are multiple. They facilitate re-election, reduce the opportunities of potential rivals to build up local support bases, reinforce the concentration of power within the individual deputy, and provide employment and a base for relaunching a political career in the event of losing one’s seat in parliament (Dewoghélaëre *et al.* 2006; François 2006). For all these reasons, deputies following the fast-track route into national office might follow their national victory with the development of a local power base. Multiple office-holding tends to be well received within constituencies, by reinforcing the link between local and national power bases, and ensuring the representation of local interests at the national level (Costa & Kerrouche 2007; Dewoghélaëre *et al.* 2006).

In addition to developing a local power base to consolidate their national position, deputies following the fast track may be more likely to retain their focus on the national level, with their eye on higher prizes such as ministerial office. There is a statistically significant relationship between the age at which a deputy is first elected to the NA and their prospects of entry to the government.<sup>1</sup> As illustrated in Table 1, 25% of deputies first elected to the NA by the age of 30 go on to enter the government, compared to only 3% of deputies who serve their first term after the age of 50. Several conclusions can be drawn from the relationship between starting age and overall career progression. First, the earlier one gets elected to the NA, the higher the prospects for

**Table 1** Percentage of current deputies who have served in government, by age of first entry to parliament

Age of entry	Male deputies	Female deputies	All deputies
Up to 30	25% (4)	n/a <sup>1</sup>	25% (4)
31–40	20.4% (30)	20% (2)	20.4% (32)
41–50	4.3% (9)	14.3% (5)	5.8% (14)
51–60	3.4% (4)	4.8% (1)	3.6% (5)
61–70	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)
Total	10% (47)	7.3% (8)	9.5% (577)

N in brackets; a chi-square test was significant at the  $p < 0.01$  level.

<sup>1</sup>There were no women in the NA in 2007 who began their first term at the age of 30 or under.

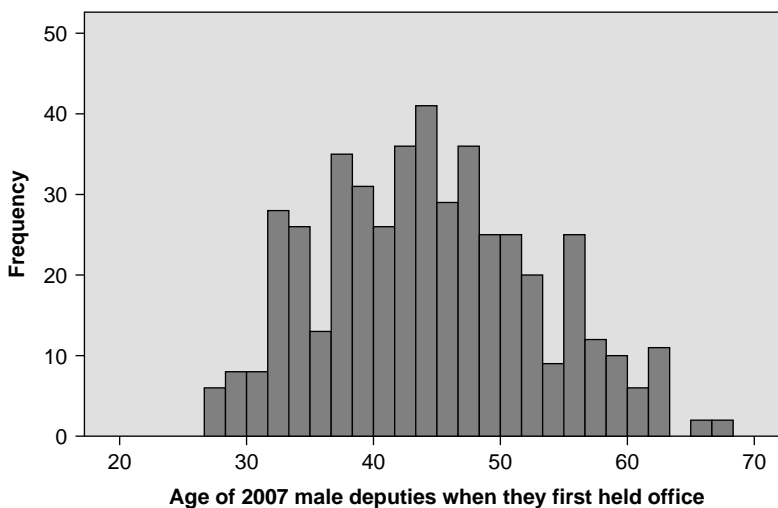
political advancement. Second, the earlier one begins a national political career, the less meaningful any other stated profession becomes. Third, local political office is always desirable, but may not be a pre-requisite to a political career. On average, a deputy entering parliament in their twenties or thirties had only served one or two terms in local office prior to entering the NA, compared to an average of nearly six terms for deputies first elected in their sixties or beyond. Of the 65 deputies currently sitting in the National Assembly who had not held local office prior to their election to the NA, 40 were first elected in their twenties and thirties.

There are several reasons why the age at which a deputy first reaches the National Assembly is gendered. Women are less likely than men to attend the elite *École Nationale d'Administration*, which serves as a launch pad for fast-track political careers (women currently represent 36% of students enrolled at the *ÉNA*, and this is a significant improvement on previous gender imbalances (<http://www.ena.fr>)). Women are also more likely to be constrained by family commitments; most women have children while in their twenties and thirties, and the demands of parliamentary life (including the division of time between Paris and the constituency) are not easily compatible with a family life. The observation that women tend to be younger overall than men (Costa & Kerrouche 2007; Sineau & Tiberj 2007; cf. Dewoghélaère *et al.* 2006) seems counter-intuitive given these barriers to women's early entry to parliamentary life. The reason for this counter-intuitive finding is that it is based on the mean age of deputies, but this does not take into account the fact that male deputies tend to serve more terms on average than women. Men are more heavily represented amongst the oldest age groups within the NA, whereas women are more likely to be new or recent deputies. When considering political trajectories, it is more useful to look at the age at which deputies first entered the NA, and doing so reveals that women do actually tend to enter parliament later than men. In 2002, the average age that sitting deputies first entered parliament was 44 for men, compared to 48 for women. In 2007, this gap had narrowed slightly, due to a more equal starting age amongst new entrants in the 2007 cohort. Even so, women were 3.5 years older than

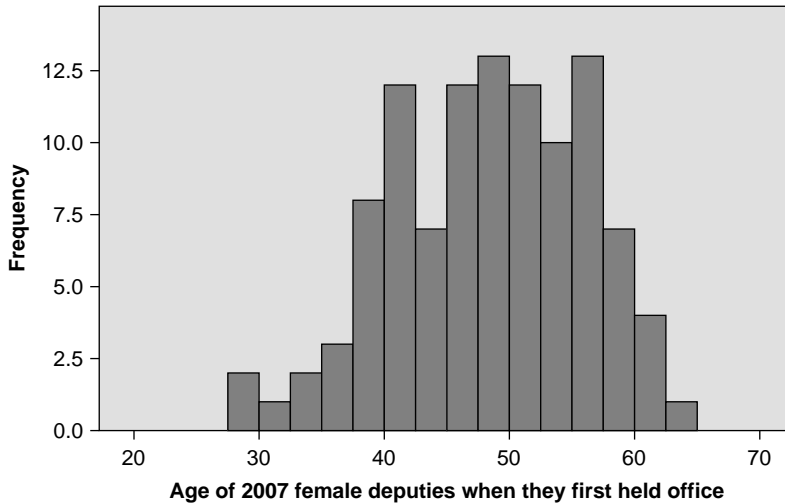
men on average when first entering parliament. This supports the hypothesis that women actually start their political careers slightly later than men.

Even here, however, the average age is somewhat misleading, as it conceals very different patterns of behaviour amongst men and women. While the mean starting age for men is 44, the total range of starting ages is wide and runs from 28 to 69. Figure 1 illustrates that men follow a fairly normal distribution across this range, with significant numbers of men entering the NA by their mid-thirties, and a smaller but notable tail of men who first enter parliament in their sixties. Conversely, Figure 2 demonstrates that women's entry to parliament is much more heavily concentrated in the 40–60 age ranges. Women are less likely to enter the NA before the age of 40 (perhaps due to childcare responsibilities, or due to reduced access to the networks and opportunities associated with a fast-track career). Women are more likely to begin their political career in their fifties, by which point the prospects of advancement to ministerial office are significantly reduced (see Table 1). The consequences of this later entry may also impact on other aspects of political advancement linked to seniority, and may help explain why women tend to serve fewer terms on average than men.

The later starting age of women deputies may be linked to political as well as sociological factors. Local offices remain highly gendered in their distribution. While the parity law has been reasonably effective in increasing the proportion of women elected onto local councils, women have been concentrated in positions which are unlikely to act as springboards to national office. Several studies have observed that women are less present than men in departmental and regional council memberships, and executive positions (Bird 2004; Bird & Dubesset 2003; Sineau 2003; Troupel 2002). Women did not obtain executive positions in local councils even when their high placement on lists should have entitled them to a senior position (Ramsay 2008).



**Figure 1** Age at which current male deputies began their first term in the NA



**Figure 2** Age at which current female deputies began their first term in the NA

Women currently comprise 35%<sup>2</sup> of local councillors but only 13.8% of mayors, and 47.6% of regional councillors but just 3.8% of regional presidents (<http://www.observatoire-parite.gouv.fr>). In the powerful departmental councils (*conseils généraux*), where parity does not apply, women fill 12.3% of membership positions and 5.1% of departmental council leaders.

Women's exclusion from positions of power at the local level has repercussions at the national level. It takes women longer to build up a local career, and women tend to serve more terms as council members before reaching council leadership positions. Fifty-one per cent of men had already reached an executive position (mayor, president of a *conseil général* or president of a regional council) by the time they were first elected to the NA, compared to 24.8% of women. Nearly 20% of men who had only served one term in local office before moving to the NA had entered local politics straight in at the executive level; for those who had served two terms, 46.8% had held an executive position, and the significant majority of deputies who had served three or more terms in local office had done so in an executive capacity. In contrast, no women deputies benefited from executive office during their first mandate; only 12% had reached the executive level within two terms, and fewer than 50% of women who had been in local office for three or more terms had reached the executive level. The longer timeframe required for women to reach the springboard positions to national office may contribute to women's delayed start in the NA compared to men.

Women had also served fewer terms in local office than men overall before reaching the NA, resulting in a reduced power base to fall back upon. As women are disproportionately placed in marginal seats within the NA, they are more likely to lose their seats in future elections, and are thus more reliant on a local power base to maintain their profile and income, permitting them to return to national politics once their party is back in favour. Without this local power base, women might be more



likely to withdraw from politics altogether in the event of losing their seat in the NA, thus contributing to the shorter political careers of women.

Alongside local springboards and fast-track political careers, there is an alternative route into the NA, namely being a *suppléant*. *Suppléants* are substitute deputies, elected on the same ticket as deputies. A *suppléant* stands in if a deputy dies or resigns the seat without scandal, for example to take up a ministerial post (governmental and legislative office are incompatible in France; to take up the former one must surrender the latter). Being a *suppléant* can be a useful lead into a parliamentary career; at least 13.7% of deputies in 2002 were current or former *suppléants*. In 2010, this proportion lies at 12.3%, as a higher proportion of the present government was drawn from outside parliament, although the opportunities presented by being a *suppléant* remain fairly substantial. However, these opportunities do not always benefit women, as some seats (those where the deputy stands a good chance of being promoted to the government) are more desirable than others, and as in other cases, coveted positions are less likely to favour women.

In 2007, the proportion of women *suppléantes* had increased from 29.4% to 37.6%, resulting in twice as many *suppléantes* as women deputies. There is an increasing trend, especially amongst men, to use a *suppléant* of the opposite sex to 'balance' the ticket, although both sexes are still choosing a majority of male *suppléants*.<sup>3</sup> The benefit of ticket-balancing is that it increases opportunities for women to enter politics through being a *suppléante*, but the disadvantage is that a balanced ticket can be used to justify a male candidate, resulting all too often in the woman being relegated to second place. For this reason, feminist advocates rejected a proposed modification to the parity law suggesting that ticket-balancing should be obligatory. Furthermore, being a *suppléant* can be a hazardous career choice; a *suppléant* might be called on unexpectedly at any point during the parliamentary term to take up office, sometimes for an undefined period (as there is a convention that the *suppléant* will stand down again if the minister that they have replaced ceases to be in the government). This has obvious consequences for the *suppléant's* professional and personal obligations, so it is far from an easy option.

In the current parliament, 26 seats are occupied by *suppléants*. Of these, six were originally held by a woman (all replaced by men), seven were originally held by men and now replaced by a woman, and 13 were men replacing men. After adding in by-elections results, there has been a net gain of two women to the NA since 2007. However, the number of women in the NA actually went down by two following the initial formation of the government, and the numbers have risen mainly as the result of the unexpected death of several male deputies, three of whom had *suppléantes*. This compares unfavourably to 2002, where the gender balance was maintained following promotions to the government. As women are twice as prevalent amongst *suppléants* as deputies, their proportions should be higher amongst serving *suppléants* than amongst the rest of the NA, yet this is not the case. This is because the most powerful deputies with the best prospects of promotion to the government are more likely to have a male *suppléant*. Only where the conversion from *suppléante* to deputy comes unexpectedly, such as in the death of a deputy, can this method of entry into

parliament favour women. The ‘fortuitous’ death of one’s colleague can hardly be seen as a desirable pathway into parliament. In addition, the unexpected nature of such events can place a particular strain on *suppléants*, who are obliged to reorganise their personal and professional lives without warning.

This section has argued that various pathways into parliament are gendered. Women tend to enter politics later than men, and are less likely to benefit from the accelerated careers offered by opportunities such as studying at the ÉNA. Women tend to be excluded from the most prestigious springboard positions within local politics, making it harder for them to develop and maintain a political career. Women are also less likely than men to benefit from the potential opportunities presented by being a *suppléant*. Male *suppléants* are more likely to share a ticket with deputies who are promoted to the government, while women are more likely to be used for ticket-balancing and as an emergency stand-by. For men, being a *suppléant* may be an opportunity; for women, as Françoise de Panafieu (Union pour le mouvement populaire) noted, it is an obligation without power.<sup>4</sup> The next section will demonstrate that the more challenging pathways into power faced by women may have repercussions even after they are elected.

### The Consequences of Gendered Political Pathways

It was noted in Table 1 that deputies who enter the National Assembly earlier are more likely to advance to ministerial office. This is particularly true for male deputies, who are much more likely to rise to the government if they began their parliamentary careers at a young age. Among female deputies, younger women are the most likely to move into the government, yet the majority of women who have held ministerial office did not enter parliament until their forties or later. The head-start gained by men can have real repercussions when considering the most elite levels of political power. The path to presidential politics is built on experience, profile-building, political longevity and tenacity. Women who begin their national careers later are less likely to be seen as potential presidential candidates (*présidentiables*), and might therefore not be placed in the top ministerial posts which may lead towards a run for the presidency. Women were long absent from some of the most powerful positions within the government, such as Justice, Finance and the Interior ministry. More recently, women have begun to fill these posts, notably under the Jospin government (1997–2002), and then again under the Fillon government (2007 onwards). However, with the exception of Michèle Alliot-Marie, many of the top female ministers in 2007 were drawn from outside parliament (for example, Rachida Dati (Justice) and Christine Lagarde (Finance)). There has only ever been one woman prime minister (Edith Cresson, the shortest-serving prime minister in the Fifth Republic), and France has never elected a woman president. Hence a domino effect can be observed, whereby the delayed entry of women into politics and the increased difficulty of reaching local springboard positions has a knock-on effect for women’s progression to the highest levels of politics. Women ministers who lack the traditional power bases afforded by winning local and national elections have found themselves in a compromised

position. Without their own power base, they are seen as dependent on the president for their political power, and their credibility and autonomy may be brought into question.

Women also face gender segregation in parliamentary committees. All deputies serve on one of the NA's standing committees. From 1997 until 2008, there were six such committees, with four smaller committees of about 70 members each (defence, finance, foreign affairs and constitutional affairs), and two larger committees of about 140 members each (cultural, familial and social affairs; and economic affairs, the environment and the territories). In 2008, the number of standing committees was increased to eight evenly sized committees by dividing the two larger committees into four. Each committee has a president, vice-presidents and secretaries, and then general members.

Table 2 illustrates how, before the divide, none of the standing committees was presided over by a woman. Women were heavily under-represented in positions of power within the committees, especially in the 2002 parliament. The other significant trend was the gender segregation between the different committees. Finance and foreign affairs (the two most prestigious committees) were heavily male dominated, while women were very disproportionately concentrated in the committee dealing with 'soft' issues such as culture and the family. On most committees, women were present in lower numbers than their overall presence in parliament, while the 'family' committee punched heavily above its weight. As the proportion of women in parliament nearly doubled during this period, it is of note that the more prestigious committees were more resistant to feminisation, while women became even more heavily over-represented in the least prestigious committees.

**Table 2** Women's representation on parliamentary standing committees, 1997–2007

Year	Level	Finance	Defence	Foreign Affairs	Constitutional Affairs	Economic Affairs/ Environment	Culture, Family, Social
2007	Pres	0/1	0/1	0/1	0/1	0/1	0/1
	VP	0/4	0/3	2/3	0/3	1/4	0/4
	Secs	0/3	0/3	0/3	0/3	1/4	1/4
	Members	4/65	7/63	7/66	9/64	25/133	48/135
	<b>Total</b>	<b>5.5%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>12.3%</b>	<b>12.7%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>34%</b>
2002	Pres	0/1	0/1	0/1	0/1	0/1	0/1
	VP	0/4	0/3	0/3	0/3	0/4	1/4
	Secs	0/3	0/3	0/3	0/3	1/4	1/4
	Members	3/62	4/62	5/64	9/65	14/135	38/134
	<b>Total</b>	<b>4.3%</b>	<b>5.8%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>12.5%</b>	<b>10.3%</b>	<b>28%</b>
1997	Pres	0/1	0/1	0/1	0/1	0/1	0/1
	VP	0/4	0/3	0/3	1/3	0/4	0/4
	Secs	0/3	1/3	1/3	0/3	0/4	1/3
	Members	3/59	1/59	7/63	7/61	10/128	20/132
	<b>Total</b>	<b>4.5%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>11.4%</b>	<b>11.8%</b>	<b>7.3%</b>	<b>15%</b>

Table 3 reveals that the reorganisation of committees in 2008 has done little to alter this trend. While a couple of women have moved from the former committee on economic affairs into the more prestigious committees, finance has remained a resolutely masculine domain, and the proportion of women in the most feminised committee of 'social affairs' has risen even higher. Cultural affairs features the first woman president of a standing committee, and the proportion of women in committee executives has risen overall. However, women are still almost completely absent from the executives of the prestigious committees, and are concentrated in the executives of the 'soft' committees, mostly in the less powerful position of secretaries. For example, the presence of a woman president in the cultural affairs committee is offset by the presence of four male vice-presidents, with women taking all the secretary posts in that committee.

A key question is why this gender segregation occurs. Green (2004) argues that the larger size of the committees on social affairs and trade and industry made them the dumping ground (*poubelles*) of parliament for those who did not make their way into the more senior committees. According to Green, this was partially a question of seniority. If this hypothesis is correct, women's later entry into parliament and their tendency to serve fewer terms overall may contribute to their concentration in the *poubelles*. However, there is limited support for this hypothesis. The relationship between seniority<sup>5</sup> and committee membership is significant for men, but not for women. In addition, the committees associated with the highest seniority for men are, in order, foreign affairs, defence, and finance, whereas for women they are foreign affairs, defence, and cultural affairs. The few women who have made it onto the finance committee are relatively inexperienced. Of the six women in the NA who have served three or more terms, half sit on the social or cultural affairs committees. Hence, while seniority appears to be a good explanation of men's distribution between the committees, it fails to account for women's over-concentration within the 'soft' committees. Similarly, seniority is highly significant for men when accounting for the composition of committee executives ( $p < 0.01$ ), but is not at all significant for women.

Several alternative accounts remain plausible, and there may be some truth in all of them. Women may be sitting on these committees out of choice, because they are the most

**Table 3** Women's representation on parliamentary standing committees, 2010

Level	Finance	Defence	Foreign Affairs	Constitutional Affairs	Economic Affairs	Sustainable Development	Cultural Affairs and Education	Social Affairs
Pres	0/1 <sup>1</sup>	0/1	0/1	0/1	0/1	0/1	1/1	0/1
VP	0/4	1/4	1/4	0/4	1/4	1/4	0/4	1/4
Sec	0/4	0/4	0/4	0/3	1/2	1/3	4/4	1/4
Member	4/63	7/61	9/64	10/65	10/66	10/64	19/61	25/64
<b>Total</b>	<b>5.5%</b>	<b>11.4%</b>	<b>13.7%</b>	<b>13.7%</b>	<b>16.4%</b>	<b>16.7%</b>	<b>34.3%</b>	<b>37.0%</b>

<sup>1</sup>This committee also has a spokesperson (*rapporteur général*), who is male.

interesting and relevant to the women concerned. Although the ‘hard’ policy areas such as defence tend to be considered more prestigious and important, the committees working on domestic policy areas such as healthcare and education—those where women are most prevalent—are also the committees that tend to have the largest budgets and the greatest impact on people’s daily lives. Perhaps if the NA had a better gender balance, the ‘feminised’ committees would increase in prestige and be considered more desirable. Positions on committees are also, to some degree, linked to deputies’ professional experience prior to entering the NA, so women from more ‘feminised’ occupations might be oriented towards the ‘softer’ committees (although Green (2004) notes that professional expertise is more often used as a justification to exclude women from committees such as finance, and is a less stringent requirement for men). Power and status within one’s party are also valuable in securing more desirable committee positions, and women may be less likely to have access to power and status, owing to their reduced likelihood of opting for fast-track political careers and to their reduced power within local constituencies. Hence women might struggle to rise out of the feminised ghettos and into the positions of greater power (membership of committee executives and membership of the finance committee). Just as women have become more numerous in the least valued areas of local politics while remaining nearly absent from the true seats of power, so it appears to be the case in the NA.

There is one silver lining for women’s committee representation with the NA. The Bureau de l’Assemblée, which is the most powerful body within the NA, has finally begun to feminise. Prior to the 2007 elections, the Bureau comprised only two women out of 22 members, one of whom was a vice-president. After the 2007 elections, women’s presence rose to six members, including two vice-presidents (out of six) and one *questeure* (out of three). Seniority in the NA was not statistically significant for men or women in the Bureau, perhaps due to the low numbers involved, although most women members were noticeably more experienced than the average *députée*.

A final consequence of gendered pathways to parliament is that women’s parliamentary careers are shorter than those of men. In 2007, women in the National Assembly had previously served an average of 0.91 parliamentary terms, compared to 2.02 terms on average for men. This large difference can be attributed not only to women’s later arrival in the NA, but also to their earlier exit. 83.2% of women deputies were aged 60 or below when elected in 2007, compared to only 70.9% of men. Only four women (out of 107) were aged 65 and over, compared to 55 men, of whom 14 were in their seventies. The presence of women in the older age groups—in absolute as well as relative terms—has decreased since 2002, reinforcing the hypothesis that women are quicker to exit the NA than men. Although it might be reasonable to hypothesise that women leave the NA earlier due to a less fulfilling parliamentary experience, as a result of their under-representation in positions of power, the evidence suggests that women’s exit is not actually a matter of choice in most cases. Of the 71 women deputies elected in 2002, 60 were re-elected in 2007, a further eight put themselves forward for re-election but were defeated in the second round, and only three did not stand for re-election. Murray (2010b) demonstrated that women are more likely than men to be placed in marginal

seats where even a small swing can unseat an incumbent, so women's higher turnover rate may be due to difficulty in holding their seats rather than women choosing to leave. In fact, men were much more likely to stand down in 2007, in some instances due to the pressure for political renewal generated by the parity law.

### Conclusion: Vicious Circles and Linear Trajectories

Women enter parliament later than men and do so with fewer political resources available to them. They are less able to follow the fast-track route into parliament, and are excluded from the local political springboard positions which help to launch a parliamentary career and help a defeated deputy to bounce back at the next election. Once in parliament, women are concentrated within the less prestigious parliamentary committees, while men dominate both the most coveted committees and the bulk of executive positions across nearly all committees. Women are also more vulnerable to losing their seats, resulting in a perpetual cycle of women with limited experience who do not stay in parliament long enough to rise through the ranks.

Women's delayed entry and premature exit from politics combine to create a 'vicious circle' for the careers of women, where it is harder both to launch and to maintain a parliamentary career, resulting in a perpetuation of women as 'outsiders'. In contrast, men's political careers follow a more linear trajectory from initial political engagement (via the party and/or through local electoral politics) to national office and beyond. Men's political careers are often punctuated by periods of electoral defeat, but men have more time to bounce back and re-enter parliament, and are also better placed to return after defeat due to their stronger implantation within the local politics of their constituencies. Men's greater longevity in politics allows them to build stronger power bases and to rise through the ranks to more senior positions.

The consequences of gendered pathways into parliament are significant, and they will endure as long as parties overlook women for executive positions within local politics, and place women in tougher constituencies in legislative elections. There is some cause for optimism, as more women have acceded to the *bureau* of the National Assembly and to the executives of parliamentary committees, and women's overall presence in the NA increased significantly in 2007. Yet there is still a long way to go before the playing field is levelled and women are entitled to compete on the same terms as men.

### Notes

- [1] The age at which current deputies first entered parliament was calculated using data from the National Assembly (<http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr>). The entry point was the date at which deputies first entered the National Assembly, through general elections, by-elections or as *suppléants* (in the latter instance, the starting date was the point at which they became the deputy, rather than the date at which they were elected as a *suppléant*). The only exception was for deputies who immediately resigned their seats following their first election as a result of nomination to the government. For these deputies, their starting date was the point at which they were first elected,

rather than the point of first taking up parliamentary office, as this is a better indication of the starting point of their national career in electoral politics.

- [2] This figure is higher in councils serving a population of more than 3,500 people, because the parity law only applies to these larger councils.
- [3] 86.8% of female deputies and 55.5% of male deputies have male *suppléants*.
- [4] Interview with author, Paris, 8 July 2005.
- [5] Measured as the number of terms served in the NA.

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