



UNEQUAL DEMOCRACIES

CROATIA: WHO DOES (NOT) HAVE A SEAT IN PARLIAMENT?

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This study examines the social composition of the Croatian parliament regarding gender, age, education level and social class.



Women are underrepresented in the Croatian parliament. After the 2020 Croatian General Elections, women comprise one fifth of total number of MPs, which rose to one third after MP replacements. The youth is completely underrepresented.



The highest level of homogeneity is observed at the level of education and social classes. About 80 per cent of MPs are highly educated and come from the upper service class, whereas the working class is underrepresented. Apart from un-representation and underrepresentation itself, these phenomena can lead towards missed policies and opportunities.



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WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT REPRESENTATION?

The parliament, as the highest representative body in a democracy, should ideally be representative of the nation that elects its members. The very adjective “representative”¹ means that it should be typical of a certain group of people, which in the context of a parliament means that it should serve as a certain mirror of the nation. For this reason, an ideal parliament should represent the heterogeneity of the nation. In other words, parliaments should reflect diversity in terms of various demographic parameters such as gender, age, ethnicity, socio-economic background, and education (Malović 2023). In other words, descriptive representation should be aspired to as much as possible.

Apart from a certain idealism reflected in the previous part of this paragraph, representation also has its practical side. For instance, representation can increase public trust in the institution, i.e. citizens could identify with a member of parliament who shares their gender, age, level of education, profession, occupation, ethnicity, etc. In other words, there would be someone who represents their interests. Representation is also important for policy making because of the experience and knowledge of the problems of the part of society which the MP represents. Another important part of representation is to avoid the marginalization of certain demographic groups, namely women, the working class, national minorities, LGBTIQ people etc. Having a public figure from a marginalized group in parliament can also serve as an encouragement to participate in the public sphere. All in all, representation is not just symbolic. It is a tool to ensure that everyone’s voice is heard and that real-life experiences are present in policy and decision making – which should be the goal of any democracy.

Nevertheless, there is a belief in the Croatian society that only “the best” should have a seat in parliament. “The best” is supposed to mean respectable people with higher education and a “better” socio-economic background, probably based on the idea that people with higher education and who do not have to struggle economically would be better able to formulate policies and represent the people. However, recent studies have shown that a lack of representation means being left out of the parliamentary debate and

decision-making process. Studies have also shown that having direct experience, for example as a woman, a person of a certain age or a certain profession, is beneficial for the perception of political problems (Kitschelt/Rehm 2014).

For the reasons previously stated, this analysis aims to examine the composition of the Croatian parliament in terms of age, gender, level of education and socioeconomic background in order to identify which groups are overrepresented, underrepresented, or even completely absent from the Croatian parliament. The reason behind this research is that representation equals impact, and, consequently, the absence of representation means that certain groups are left behind.

¹ https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/representative_2

THE UNREPRESENTED YOUTH

The first step of this analysis is to take a look at the age composition of the Croatian parliament. In Figure 2 shows that no individuals under the age of 30 were elected in the 2020 General Elections in Croatia. The youngest elected member of parliament was born in 1990 and was 30 years old on the day of the election. It is worth noting that the majority of the 2020–2024 Croatian parliament is composed of individuals aged 45–59, with almost 80 representatives. The neighbouring age groups are equally represented.

Firstly, if we look into the 2021 Croatian Census data, the under-30 age group (based on Census data for citizens between the ages of 20 and 29 due to data availability, even though voting eligibility starts at the age of 18) comprises 428,072 people and was not adequately represented in the 2020 General Elections. Statistically, this age group – the young people often referred to as the future of the country – should ideally be represented by 25 members of parliament, which means they are currently underrepresented by 25 seats. This constitutes a representation crisis, which places young people as a top priority for potential affirmative action. Moreover, 755,277 Croatian citizens belong to the age group 30–44. Out of the total number of MPs after the 2020 General Elections, 35 belonged to the age group, which is slightly underrepresented by one seat compared to the ideal number of 44 members of parliament. However, the age group of 45–59, with a population of 804,100 according

to census data, is overrepresented in the parliament. They should ideally be represented by 47 MPs, which is 30 MPs less than their representation in the 2020–2024 Croatian parliament. The final age group discussed is those aged 60–70, but considering the retirement age and available data, only this age group is analysed. According to the census, there are 567,875 people in this age group, which would mean that they are entitled to 33 seats in the ideal parliament. It can be stated that this age group was more or less fairly represented in the parliament with 36 seats.

From the perspective of the political parties, as it can be seen in Figure 3, the centre-left and green parties have a tendency to send, in the Croatian context, younger MPs (age group 30–44). 36 per cent of centre-left MPs and 33 per cent of green MPs fall into this group. It is worth mentioning that the second best in this age group far-right political parties with 24 per cent MPs from this age group. Based on that, it could be concluded that the potential sources of rejuvenation of the Croatian parliament should come from the centre-left, green and far-right parties if the trend change, which seems unlikely in the time of the composition of this study.

Figure 2
Ideal representation according to the 2021 Census

Age groups	Current parliament*			Ideal representation			underrepresentation (-) overrepresentation (+)		
	Seats	Men	Women	Ideal Seats	Men	Women	total	Men	Women
Under 30	0	0	0	25	13	12	-25	-13	-12
30–44	35	22	13	44	22	22	-9	0	-9
45–59	77	47	30	47	23	24	30	24	6
60–70	36	29	7	33	16	17	3	13	-10

*diaspora MPs not included

WOMEN: MORE EDUCATED, LESS REPRESENTED

The Croatian Electoral Act prohibits based on constitutional rights any gender-based discrimination. To prevent gender-based discrimination in elections, the Act stipulates that the genders should be present relatively equal representation of genders, with a minimum ratio of 60:40 i. e., the under-represented gender with at least 40 per cent. However, it does not mandate the use of the zip system, although some parties internally applied it during the 2020 general Elections, such as the centre-left, left and green parties.

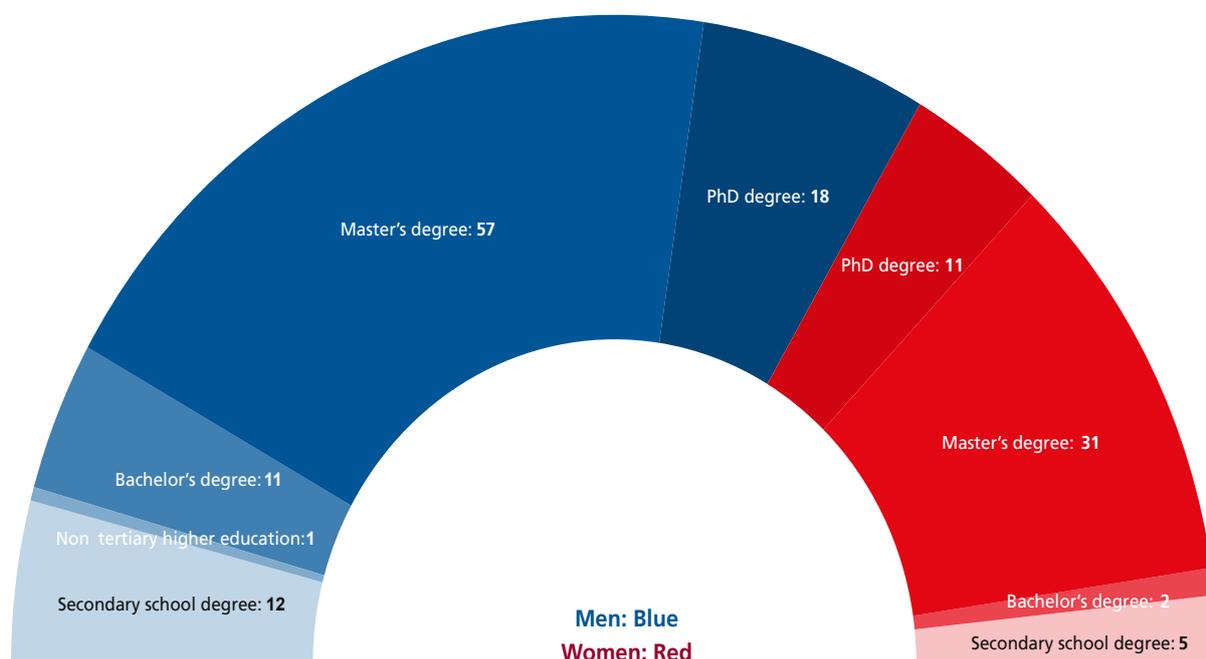
Based on the 2021 Croatian Census, the 2020–2024 Croatian parliament should ideally have had 75 female and 73 male members of parliament from the 11 national constituencies, excluding diaspora, since women comprise 51.83 per cent and men make up 48.71 per cent of the Croatian population. However, only 34 women were elected as MPs, which translates to 22.97 per cent out of the 148 nationally elected MPs. Following changes related to the resignation of elected MPs due to their incompatibility with other political functions, such as heading a ministry, the number of female MPs has risen to 50 by April 2024, when the parliament was dissolved. The

final 33.11 per cent is equivalent to 33.78 per cent of female MPs, thus represents an improvement. At the same time, it suggests that political parties view women as substitutes for departing male MPs. Additionally, only one out of the five vice-Presidents of the Croatian parliament was female, and she came from the centre-left. Figure 3 illustrates that centre-left parties tend to achieve gender balance or a surplus of women. The green and left parties have 83 per cent women MPs, followed by centre-left parties with 46 per cent female MPs, meaning that applying the zip system proves to be a successful tool in achieving gender balance. On the other hand, far-right parties stand as worst in achieving gender balance with just 14 per cent of female MPs. By looking into the age structure of women and party affiliation together, it is evident that the centre-left, green and left parties tend to send younger women to parliament. Based on this, a woman has more chances to be elected if she is on the ballots of the centre-left, green and left parties, and that these parties are more willing to nominate a younger woman. If the trends change, young female MPs (under 30 years old) should be elected from those parties.

Figure 3
Share of women across age and party families

	Total MPs	Women MPs	Share of women	Women under 30	Women 30–44	Women 45–59	Women 60+
Other	19	7	37%	0%	29%	71%	0%
Far Left & Green	6	5	83%	0%	40%	40%	20%
Center-left	28	13	46%	0%	46%	46%	8%
Liberals	13	4	31%	0%	0%	75%	25%
Center-right	61	18	30%	0%	22%	61%	17%
Far Right	21	3	14%	0%	0%	100%	0%
Total	148	50					

Figure 4
Composition of parliament according to gender and education



Regarding the level of education, the 2020–2024 Croatian parliament was representative of a so-called “diploma democracy” (Bovens / Wille 2017). In general, only 17 (11 per cent) of MPs have not gained a higher education degree (ISCED 3), while 88 per cent of them have (ISCED 6-8) and one MP has completed a post-secondary non-tertiary education cycle (ISCED 5). More specifically, Figure 5 shows that 13 MPs (9 per cent) have a bachelor’s degree, 88 MPs (59 per cent) have a master’s degree and 29 MPs (20 per cent) have a PhD or equivalent. As expected, in this inflation of academic degrees, women tend to be better educated on average than men. In terms of tertiary education, 63 per cent of women MPs have a master’s degree or equivalent, which is 6 percentage points more than men. Also, 22 per cent when it comes to PhD or equivalent, which is 4 percentage points more than men. 4 per cent of female MPs have obtained a bachelor’s degree or equivalent in comparison to 11 per cent of men, which leads to the conclusion that male candidates are more likely to be “pardoned” for having a lower level of education. All in all, it is evident that a woman must be more educated than a man in order to be competitive for being elected into the Croatian parliament.

THE TYPICAL OCCUPATIONAL CLASS OF A CROATIAN MP: THE HIGHER – THE BETTER

Similar to the educational level, Croatian MPs tend to come from higher occupational classes. Their occupational background before entering parliament was surveyed and classified according to the Oesch class scheme, as shown in Figure 5. According to this class scheme, the members of the Croatian parliament in 2020–2024 mostly come from the upper service class (118 MPs). There are 19 MPs from the lower service class and two small business owners. As far as the working class is concerned, there are only 10 representatives in the 2020–2024 Croatian parliament. As the following outlines in detail, some trends can be observed.

The first trend is the under-representation of the working class (Figures 6 and 7). No political party currently represents the working class. All four ideological groups – left and centre-left, centre, centre-right and far-right – have a similar distribution of MPs’ occupations before entering parliament, with most working-class MPs coming from the left and centre-left. Also, unskilled workers were not represented (Figure 8). However, it can also be seen in the data that centre-left, green and left parties are usually the sources of the small pool of working-class MPs. It is also worth emphasising that the occupational composition of the 2020–2024 Croatian Parlia-

Figure 5
The Oesch Social Class Classification scheme

	EMPLOYEES			SELF-EMPLOYED	
	Administrative work logic	Interpersonal work logic	Technical work logic	Independent work logic	
Upper service class	Higher-grade managers accountants, senior ministry officials, advertising professionals	Sociocultural experts secondary school teachers, physicians, university teachers	Technical experts engineers, IT experts	Independent professions lawyers, practicing physicians, independent consultants	Large employers managers, business owners, farmers
Lower-grade service class	Lower-grade managers skilled administrative staff, skilled commercial professions	Sociocultural professions social workers, elementary school teachers	Technical semi-professions skilled workers in engineering professions, medical technicians	Small business owners with employees	
Working class	Skilled clerks skilled secretaries, warehouse clerks	Skilled service providers salespersons, preschool teachers, practical nurses	Skilled crafts workers electricians, building electricians	Small business owners without employees	
	Routine office clerks call-centre agents	Routine service providers bartenders, cleaning professions, security professions	Routine skilled workers machinery operators, freight professions		

Figure 6
The composition of parliament according to social classes

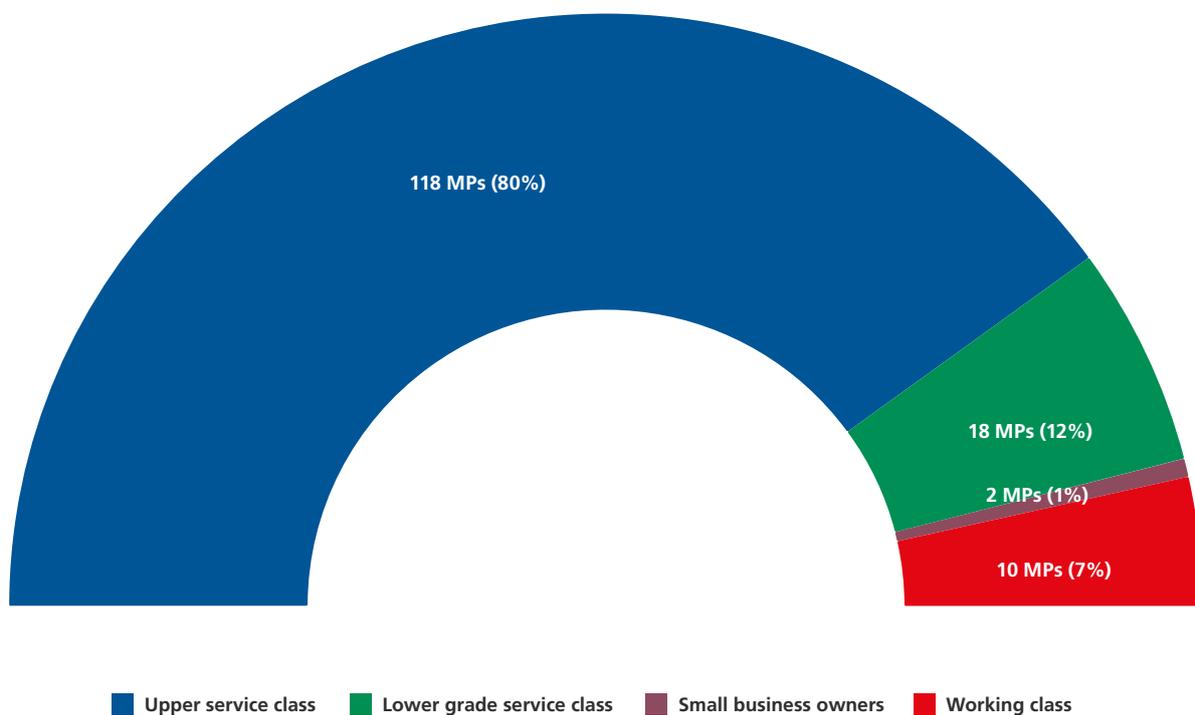


Figure 7
The social class composition across party families

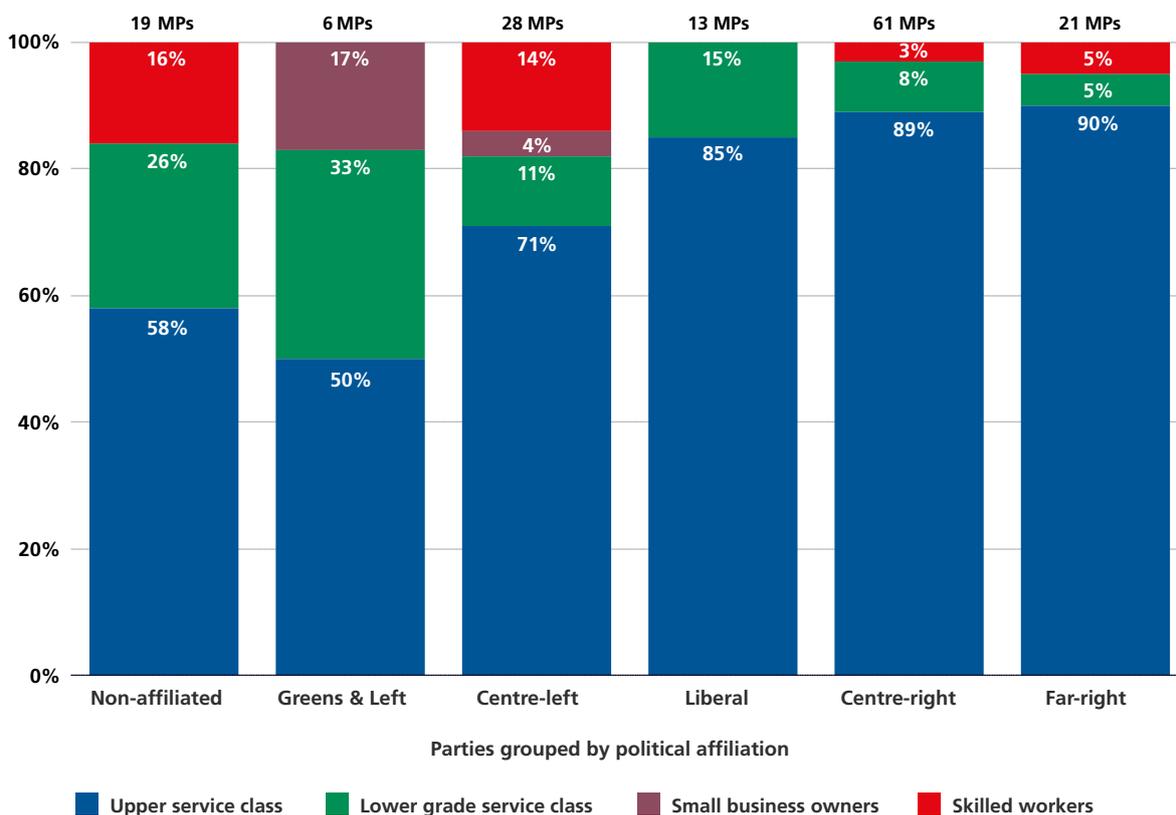
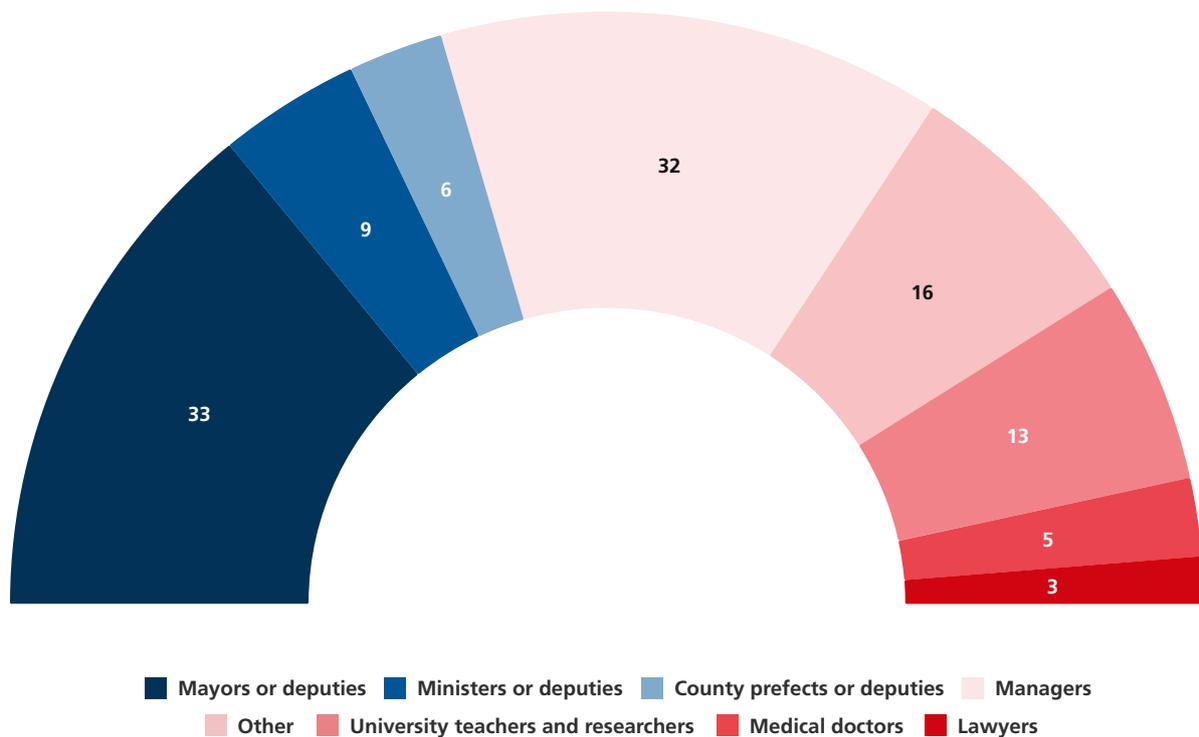


Figure 8

The share of career politicians among upper service class MPs



ment does not represent certain occupations, such as practical nurses (1 MP) and shop assistants (0 MPs), which were labelled as essential workers during the COVID-19 pandemic and measures, during which this parliament was elected. There are also no representatives of platform workers and migrant workers, who tend to work in skilled occupations.

Moreover, it is interesting to look at the professional upper service occupational class as such (Figure 8). Out of 118 members of the upper service class, 32 can be described as managers of some kind, mostly from public institutions, including education and hospital managers – i.e., the institutions where politics could have a say in the appointment of managers.

The third trend is that that 33 MPs are or were mayors and deputy mayors, and nine were former ministers and deputy ministers before entering parliament. In addition, six MPs served as state prefects or their deputies before entering parliament. There may be two possible reasons for this. The first reason for putting local and regional political office holders on the parliamentary ballot paper would be visibility, which leads to electability and serves as “bait” for (preferential) votes in the general elections. This leads to the conclusion that visibility through holding a position in a local and regional executive could be seen as a plus in terms of competitiveness for winning seats in parliament. However, it is important to emphasise that such a practice deprives other under-represented demographic groups (women, young people, the working class, people without tertiary education,

etc.) of representation. The second reason could be that the parties see parliament as a reward or compensation system for (former) political office holders.

In addition, there were 79 MPs who could be classified as career politicians on the basis of certain criteria: a parliamentary career of at least ten years, having held political office at local, regional or national level before and/or during their term of office, or a combination of these. Thus. This was based on the definition of a career politician as someone who has any experience of their own with a professional working life above and beyond working in a party or as a political staffer and are at the same time highly dependent on a successful political career (O’Grady 2019). Therefore, a typical Croatian career politician is male (64 men compared to 15 women), in the 45–59 age group (41 MPs), has a Master’s degree or equivalent (51), in one of these three fields: economics (14 MPs), technical engineering of some kind (14) or law (10). Prior to entering the parliament, they held was a political office, usually that of mayor (30), and belong to a centre-right party (42).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Women are underrepresented in the Croatian parliament despite being better educated. They are also less likely to fit into patterns of political careerism, whether that means rising from the local or regional level or descending from a national-level executive function. They are also more likely to be elected if they are nominated by a progressive political party. At the same time, there were people under the age of 30 who were completely absent from the 2020–2024 Croatian parliament. The age group 30–44 is present, yet underrepresented, whereas the age group 45–59 is overrepresented according to the 2021 Census. Moreover, the working class is also underrepresented in the Croatian parliament.

An ideal or perfect parliament has never been achieved and probably never will be. However, the greater the discrepancies between the parliament and the population of its country, the greater will be the differences, the missed opportunities for societal improvement, and the space for further discrimination and mistrust between the parliament as an institution and the general public.

Therefore, certain measures and activities should be implemented in order to achieve a better descriptive representation within the Croatian parliament, especially when it comes to women, young people and the working class (skilled and unskilled workers) on three levels: party level, policy level and campaign level.

MEASURES AT THE PARTY LEVEL

- set a clear direction towards gender balance within the party and promote the empowerment of women and of all age groups, in order to achieve a descriptive representation of the party itself
- establish a women's, youth and students' organization within the political party to promote specific messages, develop groupspecific policies and serve as a place of building public visibility regarding the demographic group and its specific needs
- initiate a discussion on descriptive representation within the party, with partners such as NGOs, trade unions, and other political parties, to promote equality and the need for representation
- institutionalise measures such as the zip system in caucuses for all types of elections (intraparty, local, national and European)
- establish a system of accountability in the event of non-compliance with the measures taken to ensure adequate representation
- invest in women and young people as future politicians through intraparty education programmes and training
- introduce a genderbalanced dual leadership of the political party
- continue to work on an atmosphere of inclusion and mutual respect within the political party.

MEASURES AT THE POLICY LEVEL

- introduce the zip system for all lists in the Electoral Act, as well as genderbalance in the leading positions on the list according to a 60:40 ratio, with hefty fines for parties and lists which violate this law
- introduce a youth quota in the Electoral Act
- amend the Electoral Act in a way that the underrepresented gender must have 40 per cent of MPs
- more determined fight against all forms of gender-based discrimination (e. g. the pay gap).

MEASURES AT THE CAMPAIGN LEVEL

- as a political party, put underrepresented groups at the forefront of candidate campaigns
- promote gender equality in communication with the general public and in public spaces, such as protests and gatherings etc.
- launch publicity campaigns (banners, traditional media, social media ...).

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In country reports we provide country-specific analyses about the state of particular national contexts with the aim to develop and discuss political recommendations for decision-makers.

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CROATIA: WHO DOES (NOT) HAVE A SEAT IN PARLIAMENT?

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The parliament as the most representative body in a democracy should, ideally, represent the people who elects it. Representativeness should imply that the parliament reflects the social diversity in demographic parameters such as gender, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and education. The pursuit of descriptive representation not only increases citizens' trust in institutions, but also brings potential benefits in terms of policy making and decision making because the experience of various social groups reflect different perspectives and needs of different social groups.

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The analysis of the 2020–2024 Croatian parliament showed deficiencies in the representation of different demographic groups; namely women, young people, persons without university education and the working class. People under 30 were not represented in that at all, while representation increases with age. Women, although their number increased compared to the 2016 elections, had a low representation despite a higher level of education. Overall, here is a visible increase in the number of women because of substitutions due to switching seats. Although this “fixes”; the number of women in the parliament, it also indicates a woman is seen as a reserve player ready to step in for a man in the starting lineup. Working class and people with lower level of education were also underrepresented.

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In order to achieve greater descriptive representation in the Croatian parliament, it is necessary to take measures at different levels. At the party level, parties should promote gender equality within their ranks and promote underrepresented groups such as women, youth and the working class. Also, it is important to ensure that party policies take account of the demographic diversity. Moreover, it is important to encourage active participation of citizens in the political process and promote inclusive policies which will allow everyone to feel represented and included. Although the ideal parliament may never be achieved, it is important to work on reducing discrepancies between MPs and the population. Not only will this ensure greater legitimacy of the very parliament and increase trust in the institutions, but will also ensure that policies are created in a way which reflects the needs and perspectives of all citizens.