

How Women's Parties Decline: The "Diffusion Dilemma" of the Women's Alliance in Iceland

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This article analyzes why and how women's parties decline and ultimately come to an end, using the case of the Women's Alliance in Iceland. While existing scholarship has primarily focused on the emergence of women's parties, this article argues the mechanisms underlying their decline. The Women's Alliance achieved electoral success in Iceland's 1983 national election. The party generated contagion effects on other parties in both descriptive and substantive representation, promoting gender mainstreaming in the party system. As other parties increasingly nominated women candidates and co-opted gender issues, a multiplication of political channels for women's representation emerged. This resulted in the erosion of the competitive advantages enjoyed by the Women's Alliance within interparty competition, which precipitated the party's organizational decline. Finally, participation in the realignment of left-wing forces set the Women's Alliance on an irreversible dissolution path. Drawing on this case study, this article advances the concept of "diffusion dilemma," arguing that women's parties, through their impact on the party system, lose the key conditions necessary for their organizational maintenance.

Keywords: women's parties, party system, women's representation, diffusion dilemma, Iceland

1. Introduction

Studies on women's parties have opened up a new frontier in the realm of gender and political parties. Women's parties, which prioritize women's political representation and are organized and operated by women, have long been overlooked. However, in recent years, scholars have increasingly treated women's parties as a distinct party family, uncovering and theorizing women's efforts toward gender-equal politics (Cowell-Meyers et al. 2020; Cowell-Meyers 2025; Luxton 2025).

Existing research on women's parties has primarily addressed their emergence (Cowell-Meyers 2016; Evans and Kenny 2019; Ishiyama 2003). It has examined the ascending phase of

women's parties in detail, exploring questions such as the conditions under which women's parties emerge, how they campaign during elections, and the impact their entry into electoral politics has on other parties and the political system as a whole.

Women's parties can be traced back to the early 20th century. These have appeared globally and usually remained small, short-lived, and marginal within party systems (Cowell-Meyers et al. 2020: 5–6). Societies have repeatedly witnessed the decline of women's parties. Nevertheless, existing scholarship has paid little attention to the descending phase of women's parties. Although a few studies have noted the challenges and decline of women's parties (Cowell-Meyers 2011; Ishiyama 2003; Jónsdóttir 2007), much of the research

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remains largely descriptive and insufficiently theorized. In the lead article of a special issue on women's parties in *Politics & Gender*, published in 2020, Cowell-Meyers et al. (2020: 19) stated that the “analysis of the demise of a women's party is as important as exploring their emergence.”

Using the Women's Alliance (*Kvennalistinn*) in Iceland as a case study, the concept of the “diffusion dilemma” is developed in this article to explain why and how women's parties decline and ultimately dissolve. The focus in this article is on how women's parties reshape party systems through their contagion effects and how those changes undermine the viability of women's parties within the inter-party competition.

In the next section, a diffusion dilemma framework is developed to elucidate the mechanisms of the decline of the women's party. The rise of the Women's Alliance and its effects on the Icelandic party system is examined in Section III. Lastly, the decline and dissolution of the Women's Alliance through gender mainstreaming, internal conflict, and left realignment within the party system is traced in Section IV.

II. Research Framework

1. Theorizing the Decline of Women's Parties

A gender perspective to the party system theory is introduced in this article. As Giovanni Sartori argues, “a party system is precisely the system of interactions resulting from inter-party competition” (Sartori 1976: 44). This perspective emphasizes sustained interactions between parties and the institutional structures that govern them, moving beyond explaining the characteristics of individual party organizations.

As feminist institutionalism shows, institutions embed existing gender norms and

relationships rather than being gender neutral (Kenny 2014; Krook and Mackay 2011). Recent scholarship has argued that party systems can also be understood as gendered institutions, and much like other political institutions, they have often been male-dominated, historically excluding women (Beckwith 2025).

Feminist institutionalism also emphasizes that male-dominated institutions can be reshaped through interactions between institutional arrangements and political actors. In this vein, Beckwith (2025) argues “newness” as a condition of institutional uncertainty and fluidity produced by transformations in party competition and in the types of parties that effectively contest elections. During this process of institutional transformation, new opportunity structures that are more open to women may emerge.

Building on this understanding, women's parties can be seen as carriers of party-system newness because their emergence can disrupt existing patterns of inter-party competition. Scholarship has empirically and theoretically shown that women's parties, even when they fail to secure parliamentary seats, can generate contagion effects on other parties (Cowell-Meyers 2020, 2025; Evans and Kenny 2019; Levin 1999). Women's parties potentially reshape the gender configuration of the party system. Specifically, such parties may introduce into male-dominated party systems three sources of disruption: (1) the supply of women candidates, (2) politicization of gender issues, and (3) symbolic legitimation of women's political agency.

In strategic terms, women's parties can leverage the same sources of disruption as competitive advantages for survival within the party system. They supply women candidates who are not readily available through other parties, politicize gender issues as a distinctive domain,

and embody the symbol of women's political agency that mainstream parties cannot easily replicate.

However, gender mainstreaming through contagion in the party system may negatively affect women's parties. Cowell-Meyers (2011: 428) argued, using the case of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, that the leaders of the movement designed the party's actions to pursue policy change and accepted the risk of their own co-option by other parties. In this context, women's parties may face a diffusion dilemma. By diffusing gender equality across the party system, they erode the factors that provide women's parties with a privileged position in inter-party competition, undermining their viability as political parties.

Figure 1 illustrates the sequential mechanism of the diffusion dilemma. When party systems are male-dominated, women's parties potentially possess various advantages such as issue ownership over gender equality, symbolic legitimacy as representatives of women, and a distinctive

position as a supplier of women politicians. By leveraging these, they can emerge and sustain themselves in inter-party competition. As the contagion effects generated by women's parties advance gender mainstreaming within the party system, the competitive advantages of women's parties may erode. This erosion depletes the organizational resources necessary for party maintenance, including electoral support, political networks, and public visibility, while simultaneously bringing latent internal rifts to the surface. Such organizational weakening may reverberate through inter-party competition, further marginalizing women's parties within the party system. Finally, when a trigger—whether external (such as the realignment of the party system or institutional changes in electoral rules) or internal (such as the failure of organizational leadership or the collapse of the party's founding ideological consensus)—coincides with a sufficiently weakened organization, the dissolution becomes irreversible.

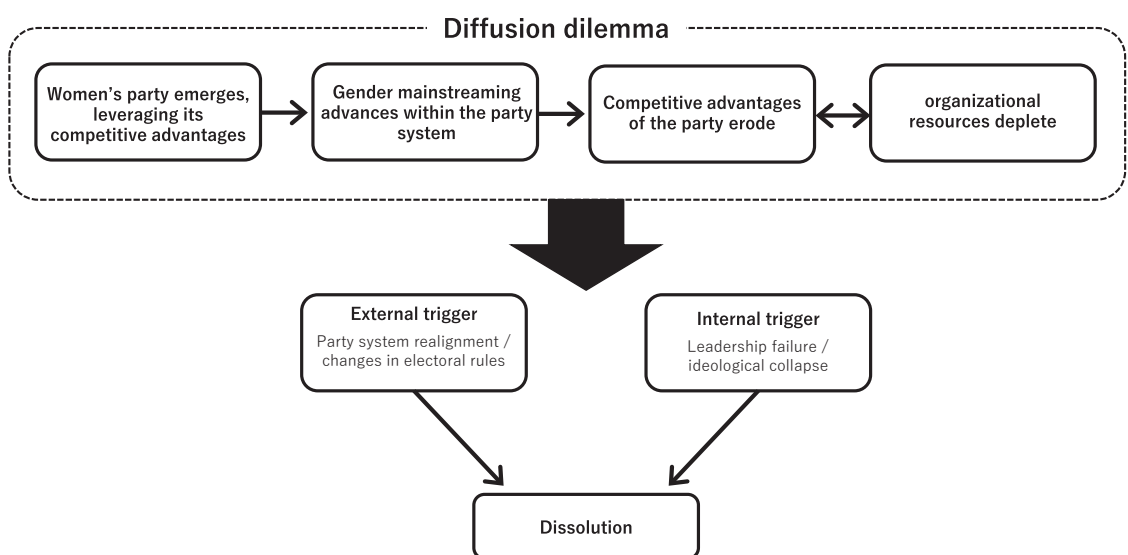


Figure 1 Mechanism of the Diffusion Dilemma.

Source: Prepared by the author.

When examining the reciprocal impact on women's parties through changes in the party system, it is necessary to examine the political opportunity structures and the changes in the women's parties' strategies and structure in response to those opportunities. The strategic shifts in the Women's Alliance are also analyzed in this article.

2. Analyzing the Icelandic Case

The Women's Alliance in Iceland was a women's party established in 1983 by a group of women from the Women's Slate (*Kvennaframboðið*), a local party in the capital city of Reykjavík (Dominelli and Jónsdóttir 1988). In the national election held the same year, the Women's Alliance nominated candidates in three of the eight electoral districts and secured 5.5% of the vote, winning three seats in parliament (out of 60 seats). Subsequently, the party maintained its legislative presence through three elections.

The Women's Alliance emphasized "women's politics" (*Kvennapolitik*) that placed women's experiences at the center of politics. It advocated policies for addressing the gender pay gap, expanding pregnancy and childbirth support, reforming parental leave arrangements, developing political responses to sexual violence, championing the rights of sexual minorities, and promoting peace-oriented foreign policy and environmental protection.

Women's parties tend to be short-lived; however, in this respect, Iceland is an exceptional case of a comparatively successful women's party. Nonetheless, in the first half of the 1990s, internal rifts within the Women's Alliance began to surface, leading to its dissolution through a merger with other parties in 1999. The dissolution signified that women who had initially achieved a certain degree of political organization as a single party were no

longer able to do so. This article demonstrates that this outcome emerged against the backdrop of an overall increase in women's political representation in Icelandic politics.

As a successful women's party, the Women's Alliance has a relatively large body of research regarding its emergence and organizational structure compared to other women's parties (Dominelli and Jónsdóttir 1988; Schneier 1992; Jónsdóttir 2007; Sigurbjarnardóttir 1998; Styrkársdóttir 1999). Nevertheless, systematic scholarly analysis of its dissolution has been limited. However, it is particularly well suited for theory building regarding the decline of women's parties. Unlike the typically short-lived trajectories of women's parties in most cases¹, this case enables a continuous analysis of party system re-gendering and subsequent organizational transformations, including strategic adjustments, internal conflicts, and dissolution, within a single institutional and political context. Therefore, the Women's Alliance provides an appropriate case for developing and testing the concept of diffusion dilemma.

A process-tracing approach is employed in this article to analyze the Women's Alliance's trajectory, from its emergence to its dissolution. Specifically, starting from its entry into the national parliament in 1983, how the competitive environment between parties and the positioning of gender issues shifted due to its contagion effect is demonstrated. The subsequent period of decline, from the 1990s, is then analyzed focusing on internal rifts and the reconfiguration of the left as an exogenous shock.

Primary sources are drawn on, including party congress resolutions and manifestos of the Women's Alliance, coverage in major newspapers, and policy discourses within and beyond the parliament.

III. Re-gendering the Icelandic party system

1. The Rise of the Women's Alliance

The Icelandic parliament, generally called *Alþingi*, as of 1983 comprised 60 members in total, divided into a 40-seat Lower House and a 20-seat Upper House. All members were simultaneously elected in a single general election, with voters casting their votes for a party list rather than for individual candidates. The country was divided into eight multi-member constituencies, each returning members through party-list proportional representation using the D'Hondt method. Parties could field open lists and voters could formally reorder candidates or strike names from their preferred party's list, although, in practice, the ranking set by each party largely determined which candidates were elected.

At the time, many major parties introduced internal primary elections to determine the ranking of candidates on their lists. However, since these primaries were conducted under majoritarian rules, male candidates held a structural advantage, given their established electoral bases, greater access to campaign financing and public name recognition, and comparatively fewer constraints on their public activities. As a result, existing parties were unable to place women candidates in the upper ranks of their lists. Auður Styrkársdóttir (1999: 92–93) identifies this as one of the obstacles impeding women's political advancement in Iceland.

Two primary factors can be identified for the success of the Women's Alliance in the 1983 election. First, as its name suggests, the Women's Alliance fielded only women candidates and directly confronted the difficulties faced by Icelandic women. Empirically, in the 1983 and 1987 elections, 80% of voters who supported the

Women's Alliance were women, indicating that the party's support base was overwhelmingly female (Harðarson 1994: 31).

This development was based on Iceland's specific context. As in other Nordic countries, women's participation in Iceland's labor market expanded substantially from the mid-20th century. However, unlike in neighboring Nordic cases, this economic empowerment was not accompanied by women's political inclusion. Mainstream parties remained largely unresponsive to gender issues, leaving women underrepresented in the political arena despite their growing socio-economic presence, a condition conducive to the emergence of women's parties (Cowell-Meyers 2016).

These tensions became symbolically visible in the 1975 nationwide women's strike, which demanded gender equality (Tómasdóttir 2009). However, as of 1981, women accounted for only 5% of the members of parliament (MPs), and their interests remained largely unrepresented within established party politics.

Second, the Women's Alliance benefited from the realignment of the party system during this period, particularly the fragmentation of established left-wing parties (Harðarson and Kristinsson 1987: 219–223). The 1970s witnessed the destabilization of Iceland's traditional party system. Traditionally, Icelandic party politics have been structured around a four-party system, consisting of the conservative Independence Party (IP), the agrarian Progressive Party (PP), the center-left Social Democratic Party (SDP), and the Socialist Party (later the People's Alliance (PA)). However, from the 1970s, the cohesion of established parties began to erode due to the professionalization of public administration, the loosening of ties between parties and interest groups, and the expansion of mass media, accompanied by increasingly critical coverage.

During this period, Iceland’s traditional party system increasingly destabilized, while multiple new parties emerged.

The left-wing PA initially benefited from party system realignment, expanding its support during the 1970s as a critical opposition. However, its participation in government from the late 1970s to the early 1980s proved decisive in eroding its support base. By assuming responsibility for policy implementation, it abandoned its oppositional stance and became associated with unpopular economic measures, including wage restraint and austerity. These policies prompted backlash from the traditional working-class supporters. A significant number of women voters defected from the PA and shifted their support to the Women’s Alliance in the 1983 election².

The electoral breakthrough of the Women’s Alliance was closely linked to its mobilization of women voters, as it presented women’s political representation as an alternative at a moment when the traditional party system was undergoing heightened volatility. It was a challenge by women against the Icelandic party system, which was extremely male-centric.

2. Influences on Descriptive and Substantive Representation

This subsection examines the changes in descriptive and substantive representation brought about by the Women’s Alliance’s entry into the Icelandic parliament. Regarding descriptive representation, the numbers of women candidates and the women elected to national office increased markedly following the emergence of the Women’s Alliance.

Table 1 shows that women accounted for only 26.7% of all candidates in the 1979 election. This figure rose sharply to 35.1% in the 1983 election with the emergence of the Women’s Alliance. By 1995, half of the candidates were women. In the roughly two decades following the emergence of the Women’s Alliance, candidate nomination in Icelandic politics dramatically transformed. Since the Women’s Alliance only nominated women, the party pushed up the overall numbers. As they did not field candidates in the 1999 election, the total number decreased.

From the 1980s through the 1990s, other parties proactively promoted the nomination of women candidates. Table 2 presents candidate nomination trends among the major parties (IP, PP, SDP, and PA) from 1979 to 1999. The total

Table 1 Women’s Representation and the Electoral Performance of the Women’s Alliance.

	Women candidates (%)	Women MPs in Alþingi (%)	Proportion of valid votes for the Women’s Alliance (%)	Number of Women’s Alliance MPs (Total No. of seats)
1979	119 (26.7)	3 (5.0)	—	—
1983	195 (35.1)	9 (15.0)	5.5	3 (60)
1987	437 (45.6)	13 (20.6)	10.1	6 (63)
1991	469 (45.6)	15 (23.8)	8.3	5 (63)
1995	425 (50.4)	16 (25.4)	4.9	3 (63)
1999	312 (40.2)	22 (34.9)	—	—

Source: Hagstofa Íslands (n.d.).

number of women candidates from the four major parties was 98 in 1979, before the emergence of the Women's Alliance; however, it nearly doubled to 198 by 1991. A particularly sharp increase was observed in 1987. This could be attributed to an overall increase in the number of candidates due to institutional reforms, such as an increase in the number of parliamentary seats and the lowering of the voting age, along with the proliferation of new parties due to the flux in the party system. Nonetheless, when comparing the differences in the total number of candidates and the number of women candidates in the 1983 and 1987 elections, the latter (62.4%) showed a larger increase than the former (26.5%). Subsequently, while the total number of candidates showed a slight increase, the number of women candidates rose steadily.

Since Iceland employs a proportional representation system, being nominated at the top of party candidate lists significantly impacts electoral success. An increase in the number of women placed in top positions on candidate lists was also a crucial indicator of progress in women's political participation. As shown in Figure 2, the number of women candidates ranked first through third on the candidate lists of major parties exhibited an upward trend over time. In 1979, the

proportion of women placed at the top of the lists remained low. An average of the share of women among the top-listed candidates in the four major parties amounted to only about 7%. However, this figure increased to 23% in 1987 and 37% in 1999.

Beyond descriptive representation, the Women's Alliance also spurred significant changes in substantive representation. In the 1983 election, the major parties did not entirely ignore gender policy. For instance, the SDP included gender equality in its campaign agenda, calling for investigations into and addressing the gender pay gap and the expansion of housing loans for childcare centers. The party highlighted one of its women politicians, Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir, as a leading figure in this effort, explicitly presenting her as a "representative of women" (*fulltrúi kvenna*) (Alþýðuflokkurinn 1983: 7).

Additionally, the major daily newspaper, *Þjóðviljinn* (The Will of the People), which had close ties to the PA, published an article titled "The PA: The Party of Equality" just before the election. It reported that the party called for measures such as the elimination of the gender pay gap, a reassessment of the value of women's labor, income security for single-parent households, extension of maternity and parental leave, and expansion of

Table 2 Total Number of Candidates and Women Candidates from Major Parties.

	Total number of candidates	Change from previous election (%)	Number of women candidates	Change from previous election (%)
1979	392	—	98	—
1983	392	0.0	117	19.4
1987	496	26.5	190	62.4
1991	496	0.0	198	4.2
1995	498	0.4	203	2.5
1999	502	0.8	227	11.8

Note: Candidate statistics are drawn from data for the number of candidates nominated by the IP, the PP, the SDP (after 1999, the SDA), and the PA (after 1999, the Left-Green Movement).

Source: Hagstofa Íslands (1980, 1983, 1987, 1994, 1995, 2002).

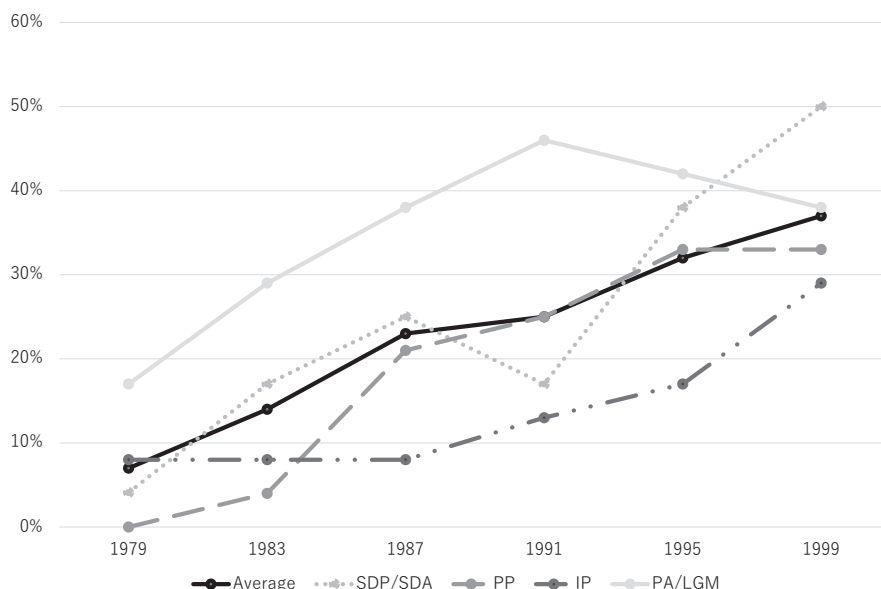


Figure 2 Proportion of Women among Top-Ranked Candidates in Major Parties.

Note: Candidate statistics are drawn from data for the number of candidates nominated by the IP, the PP, the SDP (after 1999, the SDA), and the PA (after 1999, the Left-Green Movement).

Source: Hagstofa Íslands (1980, 1983, 1987, 1994, 1995, 2002).

childcare facilities (Þjóðviljinn 21 Apr. 1983: 13). These accounts indicate that left-wing parties were proactive regarding gender policy at the time.

In contrast, the manifestos of conservative parties contained no references to gender policy, clarifying their relative reluctance to engage with gender issues. However, by the 1999 election, the conservative IP advocated for specific gender policies. For instance, its election manifesto called for the introduction of individual and non-transferable parental leave entitlements for both women and men, an extension of the leave period, and an increase in benefits (Gíslason 2007: 8–9). The Women's Alliance had continuously championed these proposals in the parliament. Such changes within the IP underpinned the growing influence of women in the party. In 1994, a women's organization, "Independent Women," was established within the IP. This organization advocated for defining women from the perspective of individual rights and obligations, instead

of prescribed gender roles (Kristmundsdóttir 1997: 8). Thus, the rise of the Women's Alliance empowered even conservative women, creating a political environment in which they could voice their opinions within their party. In an interview conducted in the late 1980s, a woman MP from the IP remarked that the presence of the Women's Alliance "had even helped in our party by opening the eyes of the men. They cannot ignore women anymore" (Edgar 1987: 36).

Icelandic politics have long been characterized by the overwhelming dominance of the IP, which has consistently maintained its grip on political power as a cornerstone of the ruling coalition (Kristinnsson 1996). Thus, changes within the IP signified that Icelandic politics had taken a major step toward addressing and ameliorating gender inequality. Moreover, the 1999 election manifesto of the Social Democratic Alliance (SDA) (previously SDP) articulated gender policy in a more far-reaching manner than in 1983. For instance, the

manifesto stated that “the perspective of women’s liberation should be integrated into all major governmental decision-making,” and proposed concrete measures, such as the establishment of a Ministry for Gender Equality and the enactment of a new Gender Equality Act. Like the IP, it addressed the reform of parental leave (Samfylkingin 1999: 54).

3. From Success to Decline

Undoubtedly, the rise of the Women’s Alliance generated contagion effects on major parties, enhancing women’s political representation, both descriptively and substantively. The party catalyzed the transformation of the previously male-dominated Icelandic party system. However, this transformation created conditions for the diffusion dilemma: the success of the Women’s Alliance in reshaping the party system began to erode the foundations of its organizational survival.

In the following section, the process of the Women’s Alliance’s decline and dissolution is traced by analyzing three variables. First, the erosion of the Women’s Alliance’s competitive advantages, specifically, the diminishing distinctiveness of its descriptive, symbolic, and substantive dimensions is examined. Second, how this erosion brought latent internal rifts to the surface and depleted the organizational resources necessary for party maintenance is analyzed. Third, how an external trigger—the realignment of left-wing forces within the party system—coincided with a sufficiently weakened organization to render dissolution unavoidable is considered. Together, these three variables illuminate the sequential mechanism through which the diffusion dilemma occurred in the Icelandic case. Particular attention is paid to when and in what ways the Women’s Alliance’s long-held position as “the party representing gender equality” was relativized.

IV. Reciprocal Impact on the Women’s Alliance

1. The Downturn of the Women’s Alliance

From the early 1990s onward, the Women’s Alliance clearly entered a period of decline. This is evident in its electoral performance. The vote share for the Women’s Alliance peaked at 10.1% (6 seats) in 1987, but declined to 8.3% (5 seats) in 1991 and further to 4.9% (3 seats) in 1995 (Table 1). Behind this erosion of support lay the fact that other parties increasingly engaged, both descriptively and substantively, in enhancing women’s political representation, accompanied by a corresponding decline in the competitive advantages previously held by the Women’s Alliance.

By the 1990s, the necessity of going through the Women’s Alliance to send women to parliament had markedly diminished. As major parties expanded the nomination of women candidates and increasingly placed women in top positions on their candidate lists, voters could support other parties while expecting an expansion of women’s representation. The Women’s Alliance’s key advantage was that voting for them guaranteed an increase in the number of women in parliament. However, options for achieving women’s descriptive representation were now relativized within the party system. Moreover, once major parties began to proactively nominate women, voting for larger parties, whose higher vote shares translated into more seats overall, was more likely to result in an increase in the number of women legislators than voting for the Women’s Alliance, whose seat gains were structurally limited. Following descriptive representation, this dynamic likely incentivized voters to avoid supporting the Women’s Alliance.

Additionally, in 1995, a new party called the People’s Movement (PM), which split from the

SDP, entered the political arena. PM was the first in Iceland to formally appoint a woman, Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir, as its party leader³. She had made history as Iceland's first woman cabinet minister in 1987 during her time in the SDP and symbolized women's representation. Following her defeat in the SDP's 1994 leadership election, she left the party and founded the PM. In the 1995 election, the party fielded candidates nationwide. It explicitly advanced gender policies and prioritized women in the top positions on its candidate lists (Jónsdóttir 2007: 229).

As gender mainstreaming in Icelandic politics progressed, arguments previously championed by the Women's Alliance, such as the insufficient number of women legislators, or how some elected women did not have feminist ideas, either failed to resonate with voters or no longer exerted significant influence (Kristmundsdóttir 1997: 5–6). The Women's Alliance lost its advantage in descriptive representation and found itself in a structurally disadvantaged competitive environment.

However, the decline of the Women's Alliance cannot be solely attributed to quantitative changes in women's political participation. If support for the Women's Alliance declined simply as a result of other parties' more proactive nomination of women candidates, its electoral support should have eroded in 1987. In the 1987 election (Table 1), the total number of women candidates increased by roughly 10% compared to the previous election, and the number of women placed in top positions on the candidate lists of major parties rose by an average of about 9% (Figure 2). Nevertheless, the 1987 election witnessed the Women's Alliance record its highest vote share. This suggests that the increase in women candidates in other parties, by itself, was insufficient to account for the Women's Alliance's decline.

In 1987, the PA, the party whose policies and political stance were closest to those of the Women's Alliance, was in the midst of decline and harbored critical internal rifts (Harðarson and Kristinsson 1987). Consequently, the Women's Alliance was the only party to present gender equality as a political issue systematically through its manifesto and campaign. Therefore, in this moment, the party's distinctiveness as a route for producing new women legislators, together with its ownership of gender issues, was maximized. However, as the gender issues monopolized by the Women's Alliance increasingly came to be shared by other parties, the party's decline progressed. In other words, changes occurred in both descriptive and substantive representation. The increasing women's representation across the political arena relatively diminished the Women's Alliance's competitive advantage within party competition.

As mentioned, during the 1990s, gender policy came to be articulated explicitly by the social democrats and the conservatives, with gender equality transforming into a shared issue within inter-party competition. Moreover, major parties, with a higher likelihood of entering government, were more likely to realize gender policies in practice. For instance, the reform of the parental leave system, long advocated by the Women's Alliance, was introduced as a government bill by a center-right coalition led by the IP and the PP and was enacted in 2000 (Aðalbjörg et al. 2022: 371). While the co-optation of gender issues by major parties led to the diffusion of gender equality across the party system, for the Women's Alliance, it represented a loss of competitive advantage. The decline of Women's Alliance was the result of the re-gendering of the Icelandic party system from the 1980s through the 1990s. As other parties increasingly nominated women candidates and co-opted gender issues, a multiplication of

political channels for women's representation emerged within the party system. Consequently, the Women's Alliance found it increasingly difficult to sustain its competitive advantage rooted in women's political representation.

2. The Emergence of Internal Rifts

As the competitiveness of the Women's Alliance declined, the internal rifts over strategy and identity intensified along four partially overlapping lines. Particularly, from the 1990s, differences among women in the party increasingly came to the fore.

First, internal divisions emerged over attitudes toward cooperation with other parties. The most salient point of conflict concerned whether the party should pursue cooperation with other parties, including participating in coalition governments. After significantly increasing its parliamentary seats in 1987, the Women's Alliance became a key actor in coalition negotiations in the summer of 1987 and in the autumn of 1988. However, in both instances, the party declined to join the governing coalition. The central issue leading to the breakdown of negotiations was the failure to reach an agreement regarding the expansion of wage guarantees, including an increase in the minimum wage (Halldórsdóttir 1988: 15). This decision was criticized both externally and internally, where it was framed as a failure to "take responsibility."

At the 1991 party congress, cooperation with other parties for potential coalition participation became one of the central points of debate. Kristín Einarisdóttir, who was serving as an MP, stated that "we have always said that we want to enter government, but not at any price," and argued that the party should not join in such self-denigrating discourse (Morgunblaðið 6 Nov. 1990: 24). However, her view was in the minority within

the party at the time. In the final resolution of the party congress, while reaffirming that the Women's Alliance would not abandon its fundamental positions or policies in exchange for cabinet posts, it was explicitly stated that "the Women's Alliance seeks participation in government" (Kvennalistinn 1990).

The issue of cooperation resurfaced during the 1994 Reykjavík City Council election. The Women's Alliance submitted a joint candidate list with other left-wing parties under the "Reykjavík List." This proved successful: the four parties participating in the Reykjavík List formed the governing coalition in the city council, long dominated by the conservatives, and Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir of the Women's Alliance became the city's first woman mayor.

While this victory marked an important advance in women's politics in Iceland, it also intensified the internal rifts within the Women's Alliance. As discussed below, Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir, a former Women's Alliance MP who later became mayor, often departed from the party's official position. She represented Reykjavík and that facilitated her pursuit of an independent course. Since the Women's Alliance originated in the Reykjavík Women's Slate and drew its strongest electoral support from the capital, the Reykjavík group held a comparatively strong influence within the party. Despite internal criticism that cooperation with established left-wing parties would abandon the Women's Alliance's principle of remaining outside the traditional left-right spectrum (Kristmundsdóttir 1997: 7), the Reykjavík group proceeded with the alliance. Paradoxically, this municipal electoral victory deepened internal rifts and accelerated the party's organizational decline.

Second, divisions emerged over whether Iceland should join the European Economic

Area (EEA). The EEA Agreement, which entered into force in 1994, enabled the member states of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), including Iceland, to access the European Union (EU) market while remaining outside it. The Women's Alliance was divided between women who were skeptical of economic cooperation with EU countries and those who favored a more internationalist orientation.

Disagreements over the EEA surfaced at the 1992 party congress. Gísladóttir called for a revision of the party's opposition to EEA membership, arguing that non-participation in European integration would be detrimental to Iceland's interests. In contrast, Kristín Ástgeirsdóttir, an MP, argued that the EEA's centralized and male-dominated framework was incompatible with the party's principle of "sustainable development," defending the existing party line. The party congress resolution reaffirmed that the party's position on EEA membership would not change. The resolution explicitly stated that "this decision shall serve as a guideline for the Alliance's activities within and beyond parliament, at the same time, it does not require women in the party to vote against their own convictions" (Kvennalistinn 1992: 8).

As Kitschelt (2006: 278–290) argued for movement parties, the pressure to take positions beyond their once-distinctive agenda can produce coordination problems, and the EEA issue did precisely that in the Women's Alliance.

This applied to the internal conflicts within the Women's Alliance over the EEA issue as well. In the parliamentary vote on EEA membership in 1993, one of the Women's Alliance's five MPs abstained, defying the party line (Halldórsdóttir 1993: 26–30). This marked a moment when internal rifts became publicly apparent.

Third, the second point was rooted in the

divide between rural and urban areas. Women in urban areas, such as Reykjavík, were more receptive to internationalization and worried that rigid opposition to the EEA would cost the Women's Alliance support in the capital. By contrast, women representing rural areas, where farming and fishing remained central, feared that Iceland's participation in the EEA would bring stricter regulation to these sectors. Some rural women warned that, if the party reversed its position, they would refuse to nominate women candidates from rural constituencies (Stephensen 1994: 31).

Fourth, a generational divide emerged within the party. According to Jónsdóttir (2007: 224–225), who produced a comprehensive study of the Women's Slate and the Women's Alliance, the party emphasized "sisterhood" and solidarity as women since its founding. This emphasis was characteristic of feminism in the 1970s and 1980s. However, younger women influenced by postmodernism, from the 1990s, placed greater emphasis on diversity among women than on the bonds between them as a singular group.

Björnsdóttir and Kristmundsdóttir (1995) argued that the Women's Alliance retained elements of essentialism, which treated women's ethical and moral distinctiveness as rooted in a "women's culture" (*kvennamening*) shaped by gender roles and reproductive capacities. Younger members, however, rejected this view, emphasized diversity among women, and reflected a more postmodern feminist orientation (Stephensen 1994: 31). During the 1990s, these differences increasingly outweighed the commonalities that once held the party together.

3. The Demise

Gender mainstreaming did not directly bring about the dissolution of the Women's Alliance, but

undermined its internal integration. In the 1995 general election, the Women's Alliance secured only 4.9% of the votes, which was below its founding level, and was left with only three seats. Simultaneously, within the party system, initiatives intensified the reconfiguration of political power relationships through electoral cooperation and integration among the fragmented left-wing forces. This situation pushed the party toward a strategic choice between maintaining an independent slate and joining a broader left-wing alignment. At this juncture, internal conflicts became even more acute.

Immediately after the 14th party congress in 1996, Kristín Halldórsdóttir, then an MP, stated in a newspaper interview that “if it is possible to achieve our goals in a way different from the path we have taken so far, then of course we should consider it” (*Morgunblaðið*, 5 Nov. 1996: 10). Furthermore, the success of the Reykjavík List in the 1994 municipal elections gave momentum to the pro-merger faction within the party. They frequently justified the merger in terms of scaling up the success of the Reykjavík List to the national level.

Notably, at this juncture, the gender issues advanced by the Women's Alliance had already, to some extent, diffused across the party system. At the time, left-wing parties included politicians with feminist ideas and even within the Women's Alliance it was difficult to categorically deny this reality. A prominent example was Sigurðardóttir, a veteran social democrat and the leader of the PM. Similarly, regarding Margrét Frímannsdóttir, who became the leader of the PA in 1995, there were voices within the Women's Alliance expressing trust in her leadership (Halldórsdóttir 1996).

The perception that cooperation or merger with left-wing parties, whose members included such women and which were actively committed

to gender equality, would enhance the feasibility of realizing the Women's Alliance's principles and policy goals rendered the party's continued existence as an independent organization less necessary. Hence, the reconfiguration of the left was a decisive factor that made dissolution a politically meaningful option for the Women's Alliance and enabled it to operate as a realistic political choice. The 15th party congress in 1997 constituted a critical juncture that led to the dissolution of the Women's Alliance. At this congress, contentious debates took place over the participation in a joint candidate list with other parties for the 1999 election. The most symbolic moment occurred at the outset of the discussion, when Hulda Ólafsdóttir, a pro-merger figure, proposed that those in favor of merger stand up, and more than half of the attendees rose to their feet. This was a profound shock to the opponents of merger, who reportedly could not comprehend what was happening and were left stunned (Ástgeirsdóttir 1999)⁴.

The proposal to participate in negotiations for a joint candidate list was put to a vote and approved by 38 votes to 16, with six abstentions (*Kvennalistinn* 1997). The three MPs were completely divided: Guðný Guðbjörnsdóttir voted in favor, Halldórsdóttir abstained, and Ástgeirsdóttir voted against the proposal. Following this decision, many women from the anti-merger faction left the Women's Alliance, including several members from the party's first generation and founding members.

Subsequently, at the 16th party congress in 1998, participation in a joint candidate list with left-wing parties for the next election was formally ratified. This agreement stipulated that one of the top three positions on the candidate list in every constituency must be allocated to a candidate from the Women's Alliance (Jónsdóttir 2007: 233).

At the 17th party congress in 1999, the final congress of the Women's Alliance, it was agreed to form a "new political force" together with the SDA (Kvennalistinn 1999). This decision amounted to a merger. Although the Women's Alliance did not formally declare its dissolution, this congress decision marked the end of its existence as an independent political party. The dissolution of the Women's Alliance was determined by an "exit" in the form of a merger with other parties through the reconfiguration of the left against a backdrop of deepening internal rifts due to gender mainstreaming within the party system.

V. Conclusion

It is argued here that the decline of women's parties must be understood relationally through their interactions with the party system. In Iceland, the Women's Alliance contributed in transforming the male-dominated party system, but its success encouraged other parties to recruit more women candidates and adopt gender issues, eroding its competitive advantages. Finally, participation in the realignment of the left set the Women's Alliance on an irreversible dissolution path. In sum, its demise was the outcome of successive internal conflicts among women as the party came under sustained pressure from structural changes in the party system. These findings support the diffusion dilemma that describes a sequence in which the success of a women's party promotes gender mainstreaming, eroding the party's viability. Dissolution becomes irreversible when an already weakened organization is hit by an external or internal trigger.

However, as the Icelandic case demonstrates, the success of a women's party generates a diffusion dilemma only under specific conditions. First, the

issues and forms of representation advanced by women's parties must be absorbed and shared by established parties. Second, the competitive distinctiveness of women's parties must diminish in the eyes of voters. Third, the erosion of competitive advantages must interact with other organizational vulnerabilities to generate a sustained process of organizational disintegration. The diffusion dilemma should not be understood as a linear and inevitable link between a women's party's success and demise.

A mechanism similar to the diffusion dilemma can also be observed among other types of niche parties. For instance, in the case of issue-based parties such as green parties, the co-optation of policy agendas by mainstream parties can erode their competitive advantages. However, the competitive advantage of women's parties rests not only on their policy claims (substantive representation) but also on their capacity to supply women candidates and enhance the visibility of women in politics, that is, descriptive and symbolic representation. As a result, diffusion into mainstream parties does not merely reconfigure policy competition; it also transforms the structure of political representation by reshaping those recognized as legitimate political representatives. The diffusion dilemma reveals not only the mainstreaming of a particular policy domain but also reconstitution of gendered patterns of representation within the political space. Precisely because the diffusion dilemma is derived from the analysis of women's parties' decline, it offers broader theoretical leverage in capturing how diffusion affects inter-party competition and the structure of political representation itself.

The diffusion dilemma framework offers comparisons beyond Iceland. The Japanese party, *Seikatsusha Nettowa-ku* (*Netto*), for instance, has survived longer as a "proactive women's party"

that prioritizes women's practical interests while to some extent accepting dominant gender roles (Shin 2020). In this case, the diffusion of *Netto's* distinctiveness has been more gradual, while a locally rooted organizational base was maintained. The way and speed at which the diffusion dilemma operates may vary according to the type of women's party, the issues it advances, its organizational base, and the structure of the party system. Therefore, the diffusion dilemma is useful as an analytical framework to compare such variations across cases.

The framework is also useful for shorter-lived cases, where a decline may reflect limited diffusion or weak receptivity within established politics rather than successful mainstreaming. Comparing the lifecycles of women's parties using the diffusion dilemma framework helps clarify the extent and limits of the institutionalization of gender equality demands across political communities.

The diffusion dilemma serves as a starting point for theorizing about the decline of women's parties. This concept offers a perspective to analyze the emergence, decline, and dissolution of women's parties in theoretical terms. Moreover, it may provide a framework for capturing the process and limitations of the institutionalization of gender politics. Further research should examine, through a broader range of comparative cases, the conditions under which this mechanism operates and the different forms it may take.

Acknowledgment

This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 24KJ2155.

Notes

- 1 There is a small number of women's parties, beyond the Icelandic case, that have demonstrated a relatively durable organizational presence with sustained electoral success, such as the Gabriela

Women's Party in the Philippines and the Japanese local party, *Seikatsusha Nettowa-ku* (Cowell-Meyers et al. 2020: 6–7).

- 2 Yet, the Women's Alliance attracted a non-negligible share of support from women with more conservative orientations (Harðarson 1994: 64).
- 3 The Women's Alliance was officially a party without a formal party leader.
- 4 The pro-merger faction called for this declaration of positions at the beginning of the debate because they feared the persuasive power of the opposing women, anticipating that a significant number of members might be swayed toward the opposing camp once the discussion was underway (Jónsdóttir 2007: 232).

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掲載決定日：2026年5月11日

要旨

女性政党はいかにして衰退するか ——アイスランド女性同盟にみる「浸透のジレンマ」

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本稿は、アイスランドの「女性同盟」を事例として、女性政党がなぜ、どのように衰退し、最終的に解党へと至るのかを明らかにする。従来の研究が女性政党の台頭に焦点を当ててきたのに対し、本稿はその衰退を規定するメカニズムを検討する。女性同盟は1983年の国政選挙で議会参入を果たした。同党は記述的代表と実質的代表の両面において他党に対する「伝染効果」をもたらし、政党システム全体のジェンダー主流化を促進した。他党が女性候補者を積極的に擁立し、ジェンダー争点を取り込むようになるにつれて、女性代表を実現する政治的回路は複線化した。しかし、これは政党間競争における女性同盟の競争優位性を侵食し、衰退を招いた。本稿はこの事例研究をもとに、女性政党が政党システムへの影響を通じて、みずからの組織維持に不可欠な条件を喪失すると論じ、これを「拡散のジレンマ」という概念として提示する。

キーワード：女性政党、政党システム、女性代表、拡散のジレンマ、アイスランド

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