Summary

One of the characteristics of political decision-making is that it has been—and continues to be—dominated by men. In recent decades a trend towards a more sex-balanced politics has emerged. A sex-balanced political representation remains, however, unachieved in most countries and at all levels of government. The claim for sex-balanced representation in political bodies is based on the politics of presence argument: Anne Phillips (1998) reasons convincingly that female politicians, sharing experiences of women, represent the preferences of the female population better. As such she predicts a link between the descriptive and substantive representation of women. A systematic overrepresentation of male politicians in political institutions and decision-making may thus systematically neglect the interests of female constituents. Empirical studies show, however, that the link between descriptive and substantive representation is not self-evident. The present dissertation contributes to the ongoing research on the link between the descriptive and substantive representation of women by studying possible mediating actors at the municipal level in Flanders. The focus is on identifying general (aggregate) differences between men and women representatives. Chapters 1 and 2 identify differences in public expenditure and revenue preferences among male and female local politicians. A necessary (although insufficient) condition for descriptive representation of women to lead to their substantive representation. Chapters 3 and 4 identify sex differences in list ranking and turnover odds from local voting lists. As such, the chapters analyze the difficulties women encounter to reach key political positions. Women’s descriptive representation depends—at least to a certain extent—on female candidates’ presence and ranking on voting lists.