

Taking women on board by law?
The corporate elite's discursive struggle over male dominance
in the wake of gender board quota

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Abstract

This paper investigates the discursive struggle within the Belgian corporate elite over the legitimacy of male dominance on boards of directors triggered by the introduction of a legal gender quota by the state in 2011. Taking a political perspective, we conduct a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of in-depth interviews with male and female directors of boards falling under this new legislation. We show how they use the grand Discourses of meritocracy, trust, and freedom of enterprise most often to legitimize and occasionally to contest the historical dominance of men. Following CDA, we reconnect the discursive struggle within the corporate elite to its novel social practices of recruitment of more women in compliance with the quota law. Our study reveals how the gender board quota is transforming both the gender composition of the corporate elite and the Belgian corporatist governance regime to redress the elite's legitimacy as a privileged group.

Keywords: corporate boards, corporatist capitalism, elites, gender quota, legitimation, meritocracy, power