



Not much happened: The impact of gender quotas in Poland



Frances Millard

Department of Government, University of Essex, Colchester, UK

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ABSTRACT

Poland maintained its open-list PR system but introduced gender quotas in the 2011 parliamentary elections in order to increase the number of women deputies. Yet this change had only a limited impact on women's representation. The 2011 election confirms that 'favorable' electoral laws provide opportunities for women, but they cannot guarantee that women will be elected. In particular, the use of quotas alone is not sufficient to ensure high levels of women's representation. The most important factors in explaining the Polish result were 1) the absence of a 'zipper', a list ordering that alternates men and women candidates, thus ensuring high list-places for women 2) the parties' favoring of men in their list placement 3) the relative size of the political parties and 4) voters' support for list leaders and incumbent deputies. Despite a disappointing outcome, quotas may be seen as beneficial in increasing women's presence and the potential for further evolution of the electoral system.

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1. Introduction

Institutional factors have received a great deal of attention in explanations of levels of women's representation, and policy proposals designed to increase women's representation often focus on institutions, including the electoral system. It is generally accepted that compared to proportional systems, majoritarian systems have proved less beneficial to the representation of women in legislatures (Rule, 1981, 1987, 1994; Darcy et al., 1994: 141–44; Taagepera, 1994: 242; Matland, 1993; Matland and Studlar, 1996; Norris, 2004: 187; Paxton et al., 2010). Yet among PR list systems there is considerable variation in district magnitude, seat allocation procedures, and ballot structure, each of which may influence how many women are elected – directly, indirectly, or in interaction with the party system and socio-cultural factors.

So the problem is not that institutions are irrelevant, but rather that they are not causal mechanisms in their own right. Institutions offer incentives or disincentives for behavior, but it is individuals and groups who respond and create change (or not). Electoral systems include diverse elements, which may tug in different directions. Above all, effects are mediated by agents.

Quotas for women are 'the most prevalent electoral reforms of recent years' (Celis et al., 2011: 518; also Tripp and Kang, 2008). They may be a legal requirement or embodied in the statutes of political parties (www.quotaproject.org; Differential Impact..., 1997). Countries may achieve high levels of women's representation without quotas, as Finland – another open-list system – demonstrates. But quotas are the reform of choice. In the European Union Poland joined Belgium, France, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain as countries with legal quotas. When party quotas are taken into account, a majority of EU/EEA countries use gender quotas for parliamentary elections (Dahlerup et al., 2008). Yet despite the introduction of quotas for women candidates designed to increase the number of women deputies, in Poland women fared little better than they had done in previous elections.

This paper explores the origins and the context of the new quota system and explains its outcome. Table 1 shows that although the number of women elected to the lower house (*Sejm*) increased somewhat, the change was not the dramatic breakthrough sought by women activists.

Table 1
Polish women deputies in the *Sejm*.

Election	Women deputies as %	Number of women	Number of men	Total deputies
1991	9.6	44	416	460
1993	13.0	60	400	460
1997	13.9	63	396	460
2001	20.2	93	367	460
2005	20.4	94	366	460
2007	20.4	94	366	460
2011	23.9	110	350	460

Source: Calculated by the author from official data of the State Electoral Commission (<http://pkw.gov.pl/>).

The paper is structured as follows. The first section shows how and why gender quotas reached the political agenda in Poland. The theoretical section explores potentially relevant variables derived from the literature on preference voting, followed by a discussion of its implications for the election of women. The paper then offers a detailed examination of the 2011 election and an evaluation of the effects of the voters' use of preference voting. The study confirms the importance of several variables long noted in the theoretical literature: the specifics of the reform and in particular the absence of a zipper mechanism to ensure high list-places for women; the parties' control of list order; party magnitude; ideology; and voters' support for list leaders and incumbent deputies. However, it also concludes that quotas may be an important step in an evolutionary approach to women's representation.

2. The context and history of quotas in Poland

Quotas were introduced in 2010 to Poland's system of open-list Proportional Representation and were first applied in the 2011 parliamentary elections. Up to the mid-1990s there had been little mobilization of women and a resulting lack of articulation of gender-egalitarian values and feed-in of demands to the political parties. Of course, women's groups emerged, but few were strong or nationally based, and the term 'feminism' was viewed with deep scepticism throughout the whole post-communist region. Despite some ephemeral successes such as that of Women in Russia in 1993 (Rule and Shvedova, 1996); the gaining of a seat by Women against Life's Hardships in Poland in 1991; and the presence of a small Lithuanian Women's Party (later New Democracy), women's mobilization was notable for its weakness (Marody, 1993; Funk and Mueller, 1993; Jacquette and Wolchik, 1999; Goldfarb, 1997). Few collective voices spoke for women on the national stage, despite the presence of some prominent women politicians in most countries. In Poland a Parliamentary Women's Group existed from 1990, but divisions between Catholic and secular politicians on issues such as abortion made cooperation difficult, while the early Solidarity governments downplayed the importance of a separate sphere of women's issues.

Only gradually did the notion of structural discrimination against women begin to emerge, assisted by international agendas, including the Beijing Women's Conference in 1995 and the requirement to adopt and implement gender equality directives (as part of the *acquis communautaire*) of the European Union.¹ Exogenous factors, including the concept of contagion, have been identified as important factors explaining political change (Norris, 1993:321; Matland and Studlar, 1996). However, while 'more internationally-oriented Polish actors, such as left-wing parliamentarians and gender equality activists, sought to include external norms in the domestic discourse...the more traditionally-oriented actors underlined the sufficiency and primacy of Polish institutions and norms' (Gerber, 2010: 35). Despite an improvement in legislation, action plans, and gender mainstreaming strategies calling for balanced representation of women and men, enforcement remained slow and inefficient. Polish society itself remained highly polarized between 'modernists' and 'conservatives'.

The current quota initiative came from the first Women's Congress in 2009 ('It's Time for Women') (<http://www.stowarzyszeniekongreskobiet.pl/kongres-kobiet-ruch-spoleczny.html>). This was not however the first attempt to address the issue. In 2001 the Social Democrats (*Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej*, SLD), their ally the small Labour Union (*Unia Pracy*), and the liberal Freedom Union (*Unia Wolności*, UW) failed to achieve the inclusion of women's quotas in the electoral law, with a debate noted more for the opposition's frivolous innuendo than serious evaluation of the issue. However, the two parties applied quotas to their own candidate lists that year. Moreover in 2001 women parliamentarians from all parties organized a 'Women run, women vote' campaign to encourage voters to support women candidates. The massive victory of the SLD in the 2001 parliamentary elections was the main reason for the increase in the number of women deputies. Although 31.4 per cent of the Freedom Union's candidates were women, the UW failed to cross the five per cent electoral threshold.

Following the 2001 election the governing SLD did not move on this issue. Initially its major preoccupations centered on accelerating negotiations for accession to the European Union. In any case its coalition partner, the Polish Peasant Party (PSL), did not support quotas and had not returned a single woman deputy in 2001. The SLD itself soon fell rapidly into disarray following a series of corruption scandals and the plummeting of the government's popularity. It split in 2004 and lost badly in the next three elections, in 2005, 2007, and again in 2011. After 2004 Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska*, PO) and Law and

¹ The European Union has a multi-faceted, complex strategy for promoting gender equality (http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/other/c10932_en.htm).

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