



Revealing side effects of quota rules on group cooperation



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ABSTRACT

The quota rule in employment is a legal tool to promote gender equality in professions and positions where women are underrepresented. An accompanying assumption is that gender diversity positively affects one of the aspects of team performance in form of group cooperation. However, it is unclear whether this positive effect can be achieved if diversity increases due to a quota rule. In two fully incentivized experiments involving a real-effort task ($N_1 = 188$ and $N_2 = 268$), we examined the impact of quotas as compared to performance-based promotion on group cooperation. We thereby categorized participants either with regard to gender or to an artificial category that was randomly assigned. Cooperation within groups declined when promotion was based on quota compared to performance-based promotion, irrespective of the categorization criterion. Further analyses revealed that this negative effect of quota rules on cooperation is not driven by procedural fairness perceptions or expectations about performance of the promoted group member. Implications of the results for the implementation of equality and diversity initiatives are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Despite significant advances during the past decades, a large gap exists between the representation of men and women in the labor force. The underrepresentation of women is particularly striking in high-profile business positions, such as company executives or board members (International Labour Organization, 2012). The facts are clear and the social and eco-

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conomic importance of achieving gender equality in the workplace is undisputable. Yet, there is a lack of consensus regarding the types of measures that should be applied in order to introduce gender equality in the workforce. A variety of measures have been proposed, from those that aim to address specific obstacles commonly faced by women (such as improved child-care provisions) to those that focus more directly on the promotion of women, be it through the provision of additional training, or through the implementation of mandatory quotas.² From among the various gender equality and diversity policies, the introduction of mandatory gender quotas has attracted the greatest controversy. Until recently, quotas for women were mainly restricted to political participation (i.e., in national parliaments, [Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2014](#)). However, quotas have now become a popular strategy for increasing women's representation in other sectors as well, such as on corporate boards ([Catalyst, 2014](#)).

On the one hand, policymakers who propose the introduction of a gender quota in public agencies and private organizations do so because this strategy guarantees the increase in women's representation in a specific position or domain within a relatively short period. Besides this immediate benefit, legislators claim that introducing quotas for boards of directors in listed companies will bring additional benefits in the form of increased corporate performance. For example, a report from the European Commission points out that the “presence of women [on boards] contributes to improving corporate governance, team performance and the quality of decision-making” ([European Commission, 2012, p. 13](#)). A crucial—but as yet under-researched—aspect of this debate is whether or not these benefits of gender diversity can indeed be achieved through the implementation of quotas. In particular, it is as yet unclear whether or not a quota procedure positively affects an important feature of group performance, namely cooperation. In this paper, we report two experiments carried out to test whether or not this is the case by examining the effect of quotas on cooperation, understood as people's actions that “promote the goals of the group” ([Tyler & Blader, 2000, p. 3](#)) when individual outcomes depend upon the performance of the other group members ([Wageman & Baker, 1997](#)). In particular, we test how purely performance-based vs. category-based (quotas) promotion procedures influence group cooperation between incumbent members of a group and newcomers.

Numerous experimental studies have researched the impact of gender diversity on group decision making, i.e., in entrepreneurship tasks ([Hoogendoorn, Oosterbeek, & van Praag, 2013](#)) and different aspects of performance, such as generosity ([Dufwenberg & Muren, 2006](#)). Furthermore, it has been experimentally investigated how gender diversity influences group cooperation using both - effort choices ([Ortmann & Tichy, 1999](#)) and real effort tasks ([Ivanova-Stenzel & Kübler, 2011](#)). Similar to these studies we focus on group cooperation. However, differently from previous research, we do not examine the impact of gender diversity on cooperation. Instead, we investigate how group cooperation is influenced by quota-based promotion procedures compared to performance-based procedures. Previous research on the effects of affirmative action has focused on individual task performance, job satisfaction, and task selection (for overviews, see [Crosby, Iyer, & Sincharoen, 2006](#); [Heilman & Alcott, 2001](#)), but did not investigate group performance, or cooperation within teams. More recent research has provided relevant insights into this problem ([Balafoutas & Sutter, 2012](#); [Mollerstrom, in preparation](#)), but has left important questions unanswered, some of which are addressed in this project. Specifically, we address the following questions:

1. Does group cooperation decrease when promotion is based on a quota rule as compared to performance?
2. Does a quota-based promotion affect group cooperation differently when it is applied to gender than when it is applied to an artificial and randomly assigned category?
3. Is a quota-based promotion into a high-status group³ perceived as less fair than a performance-based procedure?
4. If so, is this effect of promotion rule mediated by differences in fairness perceptions?

1.1. Previous findings concerning the effects of affirmative action

Prior research has mainly focused on how different affirmative action policies in general, and quota rules in particular, are perceived and what impact they have on an individual's behavior. A core finding in this literature is that affirmative action can undermine the self-esteem of its beneficiaries (women), as well as diminish their image in the eyes of non-beneficiaries (men). In particular, compared to women who were selected purely on the basis of performance, women selected as a result of affirmative action evaluated their own leadership abilities more poorly ([Heilman, Lucas, & Kaplow, 1990](#)), chose to perform less demanding tasks ([Heilman, Rivero, & Brett, 1991](#)), assumed that others would disregard their competence ([Heilman & Alcott, 2001](#)), and were indeed seen as less competent by others ([Heilman, Block, & Lucas, 1992](#)). It is important to note, however, that no such detrimental effects were shown when it was clear that performance is one of the criteria used in affirmative action decisions, suggesting that negative effects of affirmative action are heavily dependent on the assumption that merit plays no role in these decisions ([Heilman, Block, Martell, & Simon, 1989](#); [Unzueta, Gutiérrez, & Ghavami, 2010](#)). Furthermore, recent research revealed that affirmative action receives lower acceptance if one can directly identify individuals disadvantaged by the measure ([Ritov & Zamir, 2014](#)). Research carried out outside laboratory settings reports contradictory results. Specifically, while some studies do not reveal any detrimental consequences of affirmative action

² Measures undertaken in order to achieve equality for members of groups that have been disadvantaged in the past are known under the term ‘affirmative action’ or ‘positive action’. For a definition, see [European Commission, International perspectives on positive action measures. A comparative analysis in the European Union, Canada, the United States and South Africa, 2009](#).

³ In this context, a “high-status group” is understood to be a group that is characterized by greater prestige, higher earnings, or higher career level.

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