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Gender quotas for women in national politics: A comparative analysis across development thresholds



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ABSTRACT

Women's share of global lower or single house parliamentary seats has increased by over 70% over the course of the 21st century. Yet these increases have not been uniform across countries. Rather countries with low levels of socioeconomic development have outpaced developed democracies in terms of the gains made in the formal political representation of women. One reasonable explanation for this trend is the adoption in many poorer countries of national gender quota legislation, that is, affirmative action laws intended to compensate for sex discrimination in the electoral process. Yet, cross-national analyses examining quotas as an explanatory factor typically use a simple binary (yes/no) variable that either conflates the diverse intra-quota variations into a single variable or includes only one part of the many quota variations. By contrast, using an originally compiled dataset that includes 167 countries from 1992 to 2012, this paper employs measures of gender quota legislation that capture the complexity and considerable diversity of existing quota legislation. These measures allow us to identify the specific factors that have helped so many less developed countries rise to the top of international rankings in recent years. The findings indicate that the effect of each type of gender quota, as well as other explanatory variables, do not operate in the same way across all countries. Specifically, voluntary political party quotas are substantially more effective in developed countries, while reserved seat quotas are only significant in least developed countries. Electoral candidate quotas, on the other hand, can be significant across all countries, however only have a positive effect when they are accompanied by placement mandates that ensure women are placed in winnable positions, sanctions for non-compliance that are significant enough to force adherence, and a minimum mandated threshold of at least 30%.

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At the beginning of the 21st century women held a global average of just 13.5% of lower or single house parliamentary seats, and only eight countries had female representation that surpassed thirty percent (Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Norway, the Netherlands, Iceland, Germany, and South Africa). Although still far from gender parity, the situation has improved in recent years. As of November 1, 2016, women occupied a global average of 23% parliamentary seats, an over 70% increase from just sixteen years earlier. What's more, forty-nine countries now have female representation of at least thirty percent ([IPU, 2016](#)), a threshold thought by some scholars to give minority representatives a "critical mass" that facilitates substantial policy changes ([Bauer and Britton, 2006](#); [Dahlerup, 2006](#); [Krook, 2010](#)).

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A key feature of the changes that have occurred over time is that many countries with relatively low levels of socioeconomic development have surged to the top of international rankings. Twenty years ago, countries with the highest concentrations of women in parliament were all Scandinavian or Western European. As of November 1, 2016, however, 16 of the top 25 spots – and 3 of the top 5 – are represented by less developed countries. Additionally, of those forty-nine countries with female representation equal to or greater than 30%, thirty-three are characterized by the World Bank as “developing” or “least developed” countries (World Bank, 2016). Socioeconomic factors have perhaps one of the more complex effects on women’s access to parliament (Tremblay, 2008). Clearly, the fact that both Rwanda and Sweden rank high in terms of women’s parliamentary representation suggests that it is not fair to assume that women do better in Western, industrialized nations, nor is it reasonable to suppose that the same factors helping women in Sweden are the same advancing women in Rwanda.

The global increase of women’s political representation has occurred alongside the increased implementation of quota legislation (Clayton, 2016). Therefore, one reasonable explanation for the impressive performance of women in national politics in the less developed countries centers on the increasing popularity and success of gender quota legislation specifically in these contexts. Case studies over the past twenty years have shown that gender quotas, which act as affirmative action policies intended to help women compensate for obstacles they face in the electoral process such as less political experience, cultural stereotypes, and/or lack of incumbency, have the potential to lead to truly transformative results over a relatively short period of time (Alcantara Costa, 2010; Ballington, 2010; Dahlerup, 2006, 2007; Kittilson, 2005; Krook, 2006). The numeric impact of national gender quotas has made them a primary strategy for promoting more balanced political representation for women in recent years. In fact, international development and women’s rights organizations in less developed countries have increasingly advocated for gender quotas as a primary strategy to promote more balanced political representation for women in contexts of low socio-economic development, which challenges the traditional assumption that the incremental, linear path of enhanced representation, which helped women in Nordic countries, is the best method moving forward (Bush, 2011; Dahlerup and Freidenvall, 2005; Tadros, 2010). Today, over 100 countries have now instituted some form of gender quota legislation for women in politics (Clayton, 2016).

As the popularity of gender quotas has increased, so have the number of social science studies examining gender quotas. With a few notable exceptions (Hughes, 2009; Kunovich and Paxton, 2005; Reynolds, 1999), both qualitative and quantitative analyses show that gender quotas have the potential to substantially increase women’s representation in national legislatures over a relatively short period of time. However, one issue with the body of large cross-national analyses examining the effect of gender quotas is the oversimplification and lack of consistency in how gender quotas are measured. Most quantitative cross-national studies use an aggregated binary (yes/no) measure in their empirical analysis that either measures just one type of gender quota or conflates multiple types of gender quotas into a single variable. There are in fact three main types of gender quota legislation currently in use across the world: reserved seat, electoral candidate, and political party quotas, each of which intervenes at a different point in the electoral process. In addition, some gender quotas are accompanied by mechanisms – such as placement mandates and sanctions for non-compliance – which greatly strengthen the legislation. I argue that in order to design gender quota legislation that will be most effective in the context within which it is implemented it is important to measure the true complexity of gender quota legislation around the world.

In this article, I use an originally compiled dataset that includes 167 countries from 1992 to 2012 to provide one of the first large scale time-series, cross-national analysis that examines the relationship between gender quotas and women’s representation in national legislatures. A main goal of this analysis is to provide the first cross-national time-series analysis that models the nuanced complexity of actual gender quota legislation currently implemented around the world. Part of that complexity involves specific patterns that have emerged in the type of gender quota legislation being adopted in different regions of the world. I hypothesize that analyzing gender quota measures that sufficiently account for the substantial intra-quota complexity and diversity, significant differences in within groups of quotas will be apparent (i.e., not all electoral, reserved seat, and/or political party quotas are created equally). A second main goal of this article is to analyze the effect of each type of gender quota, as well as other explanatory variables, across separate groups of countries defined by their level of social and economic development. Women in politics scholars have increasingly acknowledged that the forces driving enhanced representation may differ in developed and developing countries, and there is good reason to believe that this applies to both the type of gender quota adopted and its eventual success (Fallon et al., 2012; Hughes, 2009; Kenworthy and Malami, 1999; Matland, 1998; Reynolds, 1999; Rosen, 2013; Viterna et al., 2008). Based on this, I hypothesize that the various types of gender quota legislation will have different effects on women’s parliamentary representation depending on the socioeconomic context within which they operate.

Overall, the quantitative results presented here support the findings of most qualitative case studies in that gender quotas can provide a significant ‘fast track’ to increase women’s political representation, leading to increases in a single election cycle that took many Scandinavian and Western European countries half a century to achieve (Ballington, 2010; Bush, 2011; Dahlerup, 2006; Fallon et al., 2012; Tripp and Kang, 2008; Tripp et al., 2006). Specifically, I find that voluntary political party quotas are substantially more effective in developed countries while electoral candidate quotas can be effective across all countries, but only when they are accompanied by measures that strengthen the legislation such as placement mandates that ensure women are placed in winnable positions, sanctions for non-compliance that are significant enough to force adherence, and a minimum mandated threshold of at least 30%. Reserved seat quotas intervene at a different point in the electoral process in that they ensure a minimum number of actual parliamentary seats that must go to female candidates. Therefore, this type of gender quotas has the potential to guarantee women’s representation in a way that the other two quota

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