



Encountering female politicians[☆]

Hailey Hayeon Joo^a, Jungmin Lee^{b,*}

^a Department of Economics, Sogang University, South Korea

^b Department of Economics, Seoul National University, South Korea & IZA

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ABSTRACT

The mandated exposure effect on voting represents a mechanism through which affirmative action policies such as quotas can improve prospects for candidates from underrepresented groups. In this paper, we identify an exposure effect by exploiting unintended variation in female candidates' electoral results in a natural experimental setting. In a 2006 local council election in Korea, the names of candidates nominated by the same party for a ward appeared on the ballot in alphabetical order (based on the Korean alphabet). As a result, in certain districts, some female candidates were arbitrarily elected, based on their name-order advantage. In the subsequent election, those elected females were more likely to be nominated by the party and to win seats again. However, the accidental exposure to female politicians failed to generate positive spillover for other female candidates.

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1. Introduction

In many countries, women are underrepresented in political leadership. According to the International Organization of Parliaments, women represent only 23.3% of members of national parliaments worldwide, on average.¹ One compelling explanation for such underrepresentation is that voters and/or political parties trust women less than men due to a deficit of information about women's political capability. Thus lack of experience with female politicians may reinforce their underrepresentation. For example, voters might be less likely to vote for female candidates because their quality or governance is less known, even though the voters may believe that there is no gender difference, on average, in terms of political abil-

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: hjoo@sogang.ac.kr (H.H. Joo), jmlee90@snu.ac.kr (J. Lee).

¹ <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/arc/world010317.htm>, retrieved on April 9, 2017.

ity.² This risk-averse behavior among voters would likely affect the decision-making of parties seeking to maximize votes, such that they nominate fewer women. Parties might also be uncertain of the quality of female politicians, based on lack of information, again resulting in fewer nominations of women, exacerbating voters' uncertainty in this regard. Whether information asymmetry is the source of female underrepresentation in politics is a policy-relevant question because, if so, mandated exposure to female politicians could break the vicious cycle of statistical discrimination.

An ideal setting to test the hypothesis that women's political underrepresentation is an information problem would be a social experiment where voters and parties are exogenously exposed to female politicians. Such exposure may inform voters and parties of the actual quality of female politicians and provide a chance for future female candidates to compete on a more level playing field with males, enabling a virtuous cycle of better information and better-informed voting. Using this social experiment idea, Beaman et al. (2009) exploited the introduction of a gender quota policy in India to examine whether the mandated exposure to female politicians improved electoral prospects for future women candidates (those in the subsequent election). Following this seminal research have been several papers examining the impacts of gender quotas on both voting and social outcomes, such as female education and public good provision (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004; Clots-Figueras, 2012). Beaman et al. (2009), using a survey experiment along with a psychological test, presented supplementary evidence that voters' attitudes did change in favor of female leaders in those Indian villages with gender quotas.

However, it is not clear whether voters' attitudes shifted because of the mandated exposure itself. Specifically, there may be direct or indirect effects of the gender quota policy on voters. First, there might be an educational effect of the policy. Voters might learn just from the introduction of the policy that the existing male-dominant social norm should be reformed or that female politicians are as capable or more so than their male counterparts. Or there might be other confounds because a quota policy is typically implemented along with other pro-women policies. On the other hand, the gender quota policy could directly influence elected female politicians. Such individuals might recognize their historical role as women representatives, for example, which could induce them to make more efforts to legislate pro-women laws or invest public goods for women. This kind of social pressure or intrinsic motivation may not exist among female politicians elected without the influence of affirmative action. Ferreira and Gyourko (2014) found that female U.S.-based mayors who were elected in close elections did not favor women-friendly policies or create any positive spillover effects. Moreover, ethnic group quotas failed to improve their political power permanently. Bhavnani (2017) argued that the quotas for Scheduled Castes (SCs, the lowest Indian castes) temporarily raised their winning chances, but this impact was not persistent after the quotas were withdrawn.

Along the line of the research reviewed above, in this paper we attempt to contribute to the literature by estimating the exposure effect in the absence of affirmative action. Specifically, we exploit a unique institutional setting in a local council election in Korea which gives rise to random variation in the voting outcomes of female candidates. A multi-member district plurality (MMDP) voting system was adopted in the 4th local council election held on May 31, 2006 (Kim, 2015; Hwang and Seo, 2011).³ Under the system, parties, mostly major ones, often nominated multiple candidates for an electoral ward to fill multiple seats. That raised the question of how to assign ballot numbers to candidates from the same party. It was decided that when there were multiple candidates nominated by the same party within a ward, their names would appear on the ballot in alphabetical order, using the Korean alphabet. That rule arbitrarily increased the share of elected female members in certain wards where female candidates happened to receive advantageous ballot positions because their names appeared earlier than those of other candidates.⁴ Because the alphabetical order of candidates' names is logically orthogonal to the candidates' political quality—as supported by the data—this specific Korean election setting offers an intriguing experimental design to test the exposure effect. That is, in the focal setting, the exposure of voters to female politicians occurred without any explicit or implicit effect that an affirmative action policy such as a gender quota might generate.

Here we present a summary of our main findings. First, using data from the 4th election and subsequent elections, we find that in those districts where some female candidates were elected arbitrarily due to their name-order advantage in the 4th election, more female candidates were nominated in the 5th election (four years after the 4th), and the total share of votes that female candidates earned increased. However, we find that the positive impact was driven mainly by the “incumbency advantage”.⁵ Compared to male candidates, females benefited as much or even more from their incumbency status, which supports the hypothesis of female underrepresentation as an information problem. That is, female incumbents enjoyed not only the incumbency advantage in the traditional sense, but also a positive effect from voters' being informed of

² A competing hypothesis is that voters and political parties are biased against female politicians, or a case of taste-based discrimination (Becker, 1957). It is difficult to test the hypothesis empirically because such bias is likely deeply rooted, perhaps in the subconscious, especially in a society where gender discrimination is politically incorrect. In Section 4, we discuss the possibility of taste-based gender discrimination in our context.

³ Unlike the standard MMDP voting, in the Korean system, each voter has only one vote. Therefore, even if voters have a party to support, when there are multiple candidates from the party, they have to decide one candidate among them. Also, local council members do not have a hierarchy (i.e., a person elected with the highest share of the vote does not hold a place with more responsibility than a person elected with the lowest share of the votes).

⁴ The name-order advantage in our setting occurs through a mechanism called the ballot order effect, primacy effect, or position bias in the political science literature (Koppell and Steen, 2004; Miller and Krosnick, 1998). A number of empirical studies have demonstrated the ballot order effect in multiple levels of elections across many countries.

⁵ A “true” incumbency advantage refers to the advantage that accrues to incumbents who are identical to non-incumbents (Lee, 2008). In this paper, the term is more broadly defined as indicating not only direct but also indirect advantages that incumbents could take over rivals during the elections (Carson et al., 2007; Cox and Katz, 1996).

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