



# How women's incumbency affects future elections: Evidence from a policy experiment in Lesotho

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## ABSTRACT

How do women incumbents affect women's future electoral success? Using causal evidence from a government-initiated policy experiment in Lesotho, in which districts reserved for women village councilors were first randomized and then withdrawn, we find that women win more frequently in previously reserved areas after the policy's removal. We present evidence that this effect is driven by incumbent women's electoral success in formerly reserved districts, as well as by new women candidates who are more likely to win in the absence of incumbent men. This occurs for two reasons: (1) new women candidates have more success against incumbent women than incumbent men and (2) women incumbents run for reelection less frequently than incumbent men, leaving more open seats. Contrary to previous work, we find no evidence that women incumbents increase the number of new women candidates in their districts, increase the vote share new women candidates receive, or increase party support for new women candidates. These findings suggest that, at least in the short term, women's incumbency affects subsequent patterns of women's representation by disrupting patterns of male incumbency rather than changing voters' or parties' demand for women candidates.

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## 1. Introduction

One of the persistent causes of women's underrepresentation in national and subnational governments is incumbency advantage in male-dominated legislatures. When incumbents have an electoral advantage, the overrepresentation of men perpetuates their electoral dominance (Schwindt-Bayer, 2005; Shair-Rosenfield & Hinojosa, 2014). In contrast, breaking up patterns of male incumbency has the potential to increase both the supply of and demand for women candidates. When women win political office, they may enjoy the electoral benefits of incumbency, increasing the supply of highly electable candidates (Bhalotra, Irma, & Lakshmi, 2017). Women officeholders may also act as role models, increasing the future supply of new women candidates in their own districts (Bhavnani, 2009) or in neighboring races (Gilardi, 2015; Shair-Rosenfield, 2012). Women representatives may also affect citizens' or parties' demand for women candidates by challenging gender stereotypes about the appropriateness of women in politics (Beaman, Chattopadhyay, Duflo, Pande, & Topalova, 2009), giving new information about women's ability to govern (Alexander,

2012; Bhavnani, 2009), and engaging more women citizens in the political process (Kittilson & Schwindt-Bayer, 2012).

We add to this literature by testing a new argument: women incumbents create an electoral environment more conducive to women's future electoral success. This may, of course, occur if incumbent women continue to hold their seats, but also, importantly, when they do not. We posit that new women candidates are more likely to successfully challenge incumbent women than incumbent men. Put conversely, incumbent men are the least likely group to be replaced by a new woman candidate. Further, gender differences in the decision to re-contest create a greater number of open districts in areas previously held by incumbent women. Women's incumbency, then, affects women's future representation by allowing an electoral environment more friendly to new women candidates, who either compete against women incumbents or in open seats, but do not have to compete against incumbent men.

We provide causal evidence on the effects of women's incumbency through a randomized policy experiment with local-level single-member-districts reserved for only women candidates in the southern African nation of Lesotho. This policy was initiated by the Government of Lesotho for one electoral cycle between 2005 and 2011, and was then repealed. Using data from the 2011

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elections, we find that women are significantly more likely to win in districts previously reserved for women representatives – an effect size of 10 percentage points or a 33 percent increase. We attribute this finding to incumbency patterns in areas previously reserved by the quota. First, the quota benefitted women incumbents in previously reserved areas, who in the next election held twice as many seats as incumbent women in unreserved areas. Second, the quota benefitted new women candidates who were more successful at challenging women incumbents in formerly reserved areas than incumbents in unreserved areas. Finally, women incumbents in previously reserved areas re-contested less frequently to the benefit of new women candidates, who could compete for a greater number of open seats. We find no evidence that women incumbents increased the number of new women candidates in their districts, increased the average vote share women candidates received, or increased the backing women candidates received from competitive political parties.

Our findings relate to a similar government-initiated policy experiment with subnational districts reserved for women village council leaders in India. Research from India suggests women village leaders increase citizens' and parties' demand for women candidates (Beaman et al., 2009; Beaman, Duflo, Pande, & Topalova, 2010, 2012; Bhavnani, 2009). Our evidence points in a different direction: quotas increase women's representation once they are withdrawn by eliminating races with incumbent men in the subsequent election. We estimate which component of our treatment effect stems from incumbent women's electoral success and which stems from the success of new women candidates in previously reserved districts. In combination, these findings have important implications for representation theorists, as they suggest that women's initial presence in politics leads to their continued presence by limiting the power of incumbency in male-dominated legislatures rather than immediately changing citizens' and parties' demand for female representation.

Finally, our research adds to the substantial literature on the effects of women's increased presence in African national and subnational legislatures. Women's parliamentary representation on the African subcontinent has doubled in the last fifteen years and tripled in the last twenty-five in large part due to the rapid diffusion of electoral gender quotas across the region (Kang & Tripp, 2018; Tripp & Kang, 2008). Although less reliable data is available at the subnational level, electoral gender quotas are also increasingly emerging in local governments. For instance, in addition to Lesotho, in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region alone, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, and Tanzania have all implemented high-impact gender quotas in local councils in the last twenty-five years, and women's representation in local government subsequently averages over 40 percent in these five countries. In response to this phenomenon, an abundance of research has documented the effects of women's increased representation across the subcontinent, with most studies focusing on the potential implications for the substantive representation of women's interests in the policy-making process (Atanga, 2010; Bauer & Britton, 2006; Bauer, 2012; Clayton, Josefsson & Wang, 2017; Clayton, Josefsson, Mattes & Mozaffar, 2018; Goetz & Hassim, 2003; Tamale, 1999; Tripp, 2000). Other work from African cases points to the symbolic effects of women officeholders, which may increase the political efficacy and engagement of women citizens (Barnes & Burchard, 2012; Burnet, 2011). Yet, despite the changing composition of African legislative bodies, to date little work has explicitly examined how women's presence in political decision-making affects the electoral environment faced by new women candidates.

## 2. The lasting effects of women's representation: previous explanations

Previous research suggests several ways women's presence in politics may affect subsequent elections. First, incumbents typically have distinct electoral advantages, such as increased name recognition, political experience, party support and access to political networks and resources (see Matland & Studlar, 2004). Incumbency retention in male-dominated legislatures, then, serves as an institutional barrier to the electoral success of new women candidates (Murray, 2008; Schwindt-Bayer, 2005). Conversely, when women fill incumbent seats, they likely experience similar advantages. Further, incumbency may particularly benefit women candidates if voters and parties penalize inexperienced women more than inexperienced men. If men appear more *prima facie* electable than women because voters and parties have historically associated men with leadership, a term in office could provide voters and parties evidence that a particular woman incumbent can effectively govern (see Shair-Rosenfield & Hinojosa, 2014).

The literature on women's descriptive representation also suggests women incumbents affect the political behavior of other relevant political actors. First, women incumbents may compel new women candidates to compete by acting as role models, inspiring other women to enter the political fray or if new women candidates perceive races against incumbent women as less challenging than races against incumbent men (Bhavnani, 2009; Palmer & Simon, 2005). This claim, however, is somewhat contested in the literature. Recent studies have found that women incumbents do not affect the entry of new women candidates in their own electoral districts (Bhalotra et al., 2017; Ferreira & Gyorko, 2014), and mixed evidence that women incumbents compel new women candidates to compete in nearby or lesser races (Brockman, 2014; Gilardi, 2015; Ladam, Harden, & Windett, 2018).

Women incumbents can also affect the behavior of party leaders. Because political parties typically act as gatekeepers in the political recruitment process, securing competitive party backing is often a necessary step in a successful candidacy (see Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2015; Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2016; Hinojosa, 2012; Norris & Lovenduski, 1995). Women's incumbency, then, may increase women's descriptive representation by mitigating bias among political party elites who control candidate selection at the local level, as women incumbents may demonstrate to party leaders that women can effectively govern (Bhavnani, 2009; Caul, 1999; Sanbonmatsu, 2006; Shair-Rosenfield, 2012). Distinct from theories that highlight how incumbency affects the party support of a particular incumbent woman, this line of research emphasizes how women officeholders cause parties to update their beliefs about the electability or governing capabilities of women candidates in general.

Additionally, the presence of women incumbents may reduce gender bias among voters. By challenging the historically constructed belief that women hold a socially inferior place to men, exposure to women incumbents may reduce citizens' taste-based discrimination or cause voters to update their beliefs about the abilities of women to effectively govern (Alexander, 2012; Shair-Rosenfield, 2012). Further, whereas risk-adverse voters may not have voted for women candidates in the past because they did not know whether women could perform as well as men, a woman incumbent may give voters new information about women representatives' potential competence. Finally, exposure to women incumbents may challenge citizens' implicit gender biases which stem from the historical association of men as effective leaders (Beaman et al., 2009; Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Yet, importantly, not all research suggests women's presence in politics will positively affect women's electoral success in future

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