



# Choice sets, gender, and candidate choice in Brazil



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## ABSTRACT

Is there a gender gap in Latin American attitudes toward women politicians? While scholars of Latin America have examined the role of institutions and quotas in women's electoral success, less attention has been paid to voters' attitudes about women leaders. In this paper, we report on two survey experiments and an observational study in Brazil looking at the effect of candidate gender on vote choice. We asked subjects to choose a candidate from a hypothetical ballot while randomly varying candidates' gender. We find a strong and consistent 5–7 percentage point pro-female bias. Our experiments illustrate a novel approach to testing candidate choice models.

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## 1. Introduction

Recent presidential elections suggest that a transformation in gender politics is taking place in Latin America, with women running for – and often winning – the presidency across the region. Today, Brazil, Chile, and Argentina all have women presidents. In the past, Ecuador, Bolivia, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua have also had women leaders. In other countries, women are competing at the highest level, suggesting more changes in the future. The incumbent party (PAN) in Mexico nominated a woman candidate in the last election. In Chile, both front-runners in 2013–2014 cycle were women. In Peru, Keiko Fujimori nearly defeated Ollanta Humala in 2011. The success of women at the highest levels suggests that Latin America has made great strides in gender equality and has

surpassed many developed countries, including the United States.

However, there remain many troubling signs of inequality. On most social indicators, women still struggle with less access to education, lower incomes, and lower rates of labor force participation. Attitudes among many Latin Americans are still very traditional and conservative, with many in public opinion surveys supporting the notion that “women's place is in the home”. Even more stunning, more than a quarter of Brazilians in a recent study agreed that women who dress and act provocatively “deserve to be attacked and raped” (IPEA, 2014). In the political sphere, there remains a contrast between the success of women seeking national office, and their struggles in lower level competitions. While women have made progress in Presidential elections, in most countries they continue to lag behind men in legislative and local elections.

Most research focused on Latin America's female politicians has analyzed the effectiveness of quotas systems in helping women access elected positions (Baldez, 2004; Franceschet et al., 2012; Htun and Jones, 2002; Jones, 1996, 1998, 2004, 2009; Jones and Navia, 1999; Schmidt

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and Saunders, 2004). Conclusions from that literature focus on the best institutions to bring about gender parity in representation. Yet legal prescriptions and descriptive representation may be no substitute for deeper structural and social changes. For example, while Brazil requires that 30% of list candidates be women, only 10% of deputies elected in 2014 were women.<sup>1</sup> In addition, without attitudinal changes among voters, women will always face additional challenges in their political advancement. Understanding the gender gap in descriptive representation requires moving beyond institutions to also examine attitudes, yet the literature on attitudes and gender is largely limited to developed democracies (Dolan, 1997, 2010; Lammers et al., 2009; McElroy and Marsh, 2010; Philpot and Walton Jr, 2007; Sanbonmatsu, 2002).

In this paper we investigate gender bias in candidate choice in Brazil, using two experiments and an observational study of election results. The two survey experiments measure gender bias in candidate choice. In each, we ask subjects to choose a preferred candidate from a list of hypothetical candidates for legislative office. In the first experiment we manipulated the race and gender of three candidates on a hypothetical ballot. We find a significant bias towards female candidates when comparing white male and female candidates, but the effect is much smaller when comparing male and female black candidates. In the second experiment, we focus on white candidates and vary ballot size from 3 to 12, using Cunow's (2014) MPH software. We test for differences in expressed support as a function of candidate gender. We find a strong and remarkably consistent 7 percentage point bias in favor of women candidates. This pro-woman bias is remarkably consistent across subjects' gender, education, political interest, and issue preferences. There is a slight difference in effect size across party: the pro-female bias was strongest for subjects supporting leftist parties, but even so, there is pro-female bias for subjects supporting other parties, as well as among independent subjects.

Our experimental results have several possible interpretations. One is a demonstration effect associated with the election of the then very popular Dilma Rousseff, Brazil's first woman president, where positive affect for the President might benefit all female candidates. We use a regression discontinuity design (RDD) to test for demonstration effects in mayoral elections, asking whether the election of a female mayor has positive effects for women running for other offices in subsequent elections. Results in this case are negative; the election of a woman mayor *reduces* expected vote share for women in some downstream elections; in others, the demonstration effect has no obvious effect.

<sup>1</sup> The quota law is quite lax. If there are more than 70% of candidates of the same sex on a party list, candidates of the over-represented gender can be removed from the list but they are not substituted by candidates of the under-represented gender. Furthermore, this policy only applies if parties submit the maximum number of candidates possible per constituency. This maximum was raised from 100% to 150% of total seats per constituency at the time the quota law passed, thus minimizing the effect of the quota law. Finally, because of Brazil's open list system, the law does not include restrictions for the position of female candidates on party lists.

We proceed in four additional steps. In section two, we discuss the literature on gender stereotypes affecting vote choice. The third section describes our experimental design. The fourth section presents the results from the experiments as well as the regression discontinuity. The final section discusses our findings and suggests directions for future research.

## 2. Factors affecting support for female politicians

As mentioned, most previous work on Latin America focuses on quotas' and other rules' impact on descriptive representation – the number of women elected under various institutional frameworks. Research on voters' attitudes about gender, however, is less common in Latin America. The majority of the studies looking at women's political participation in electoral politics examine established democracies, usually the United States, Canada, and Western Europe. Previous work on voters, primarily survey research, examines the impact of individual traits, broader context, and stereotypes in shaping voter attitudes toward female politicians.

Scholars have found many individual traits that affect attitudes toward female candidates, including gender of subject, political interest, age, education, and ideology (Dolan, 1997; Sanbonmatsu, 2002). At the same time, these do not appear to have universal traction cross-nationally. Schwindt-Bayer et al. (2010) looked at three cases with single transferable vote and found that voters preferred female candidates in Australia, male candidates in Ireland, and were indifferent across candidate gender in Malta, with some factors flipping signs or losing significance across cases. This suggests that gender attitudes are highly context and culture specific.

Beyond individual factors, scholars also argue that context matters. Much of this literature focuses on the role of development. Inglehart and Norris (2003) argue that modernization leads citizens to hold more egalitarian views regarding gender. On the other hand, there are notable deviant cases where gaps in women's political representation persist in developed countries, like the United States and Japan.

In addition to modernization, scholars have also examined the impact of other contextual factors on gender attitudes, including socialization, status discontent, and elite cues. Morgan and Buice (2013) examine both contextual and individual factors that affect attitudes toward women, as well as their interaction. Status discontent suggests that men will be threatened by increasing female representation, but only above a certain threshold. Elite cues also have differential effects because they should only affect those with weaker opinions. Morgan and Buice (2013) find no evidence of any socialization interactions, but they do find evidence of status discontent and elite cue impacts on gender attitudes.

Citizens' attitudes toward female politicians can also be mediated by stereotypes and group consciousness. The majority of studies looking at the effect of stereotypes and group consciousness on voters' attitudes toward female candidates are based in the U.S. and find a negative effect of gender stereotypes, affecting mostly male voters, on female

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