

Gender quotas, candidate background and the election of women: A paradox of gender quotas in open-list proportional representation systems



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 4 February 2013
Received in revised form 25 March 2014
Accepted 17 June 2014
Available online 26 June 2014

Keywords:

Women and elections
Gender quotas
Open-list proportional representation systems
Poland

ABSTRACT

We study the effects of mandatory (legislated) gender quotas in Poland, a country utilising an open-list proportional representation electoral system. We use a unique data set comprising multiple characteristics of all candidates running in two consecutive elections to the lower chamber of the Polish parliament (the *Sejm*). The first of them (held in 2007) was the last pre-quota election and the second (held in 2011) the first post-quota one. We show that quotas have an inherently paradoxical nature: they cause a substantial increase in the number of female candidates but the increase is accompanied by a sharp decline in women's electoral performance. This regularity holds even if we account for multiple indicators of candidate background, including previous political experience.

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1. Introduction

Save for a few exceptions, women's descriptive (quantitative) underrepresentation in the democratically elected parliaments around the world is an indisputable fact. On average, only approximately 22 per cent of the world's elected representatives are women (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2014). Poor descriptive representation may contribute to poor representation of women's substantive political interests (Chen, 2010; Holli and Wass, 2010). Thus, propositions of how to reduce gender disproportions in national legislatures have attracted much interest on part of both scholarly community and policy-makers. Gender quotas are one such mechanism. They are commonly considered to be a 'fast track' solution (Schwindt-Bayer, 2009: 5), a mechanism which, if correctly applied, can yield a reasonably quick increase in the numbers of women holding elected office. Since 1991, the year Argentina

introduced the world's first national quota law, a number of countries have thus decided to rely on this solution.¹

An increasing number of studies have attempted to assess the effectiveness of legislated gender quotas in various political contexts. A type of a political setting where, we argue, quotas have not been given due attention is countries using variants of an open-list proportional representation (PR) electoral system. While there exist various descriptive and aggregate-level accounts of the impact of quotas on women's electoral success in such systems, especially in Brazil (Miguel, 2008), Indonesia (Hoodfar and Tajali, 2011) and Peru (Schmidt, 2003a, 2003b), there are virtually no systematic micro-level (i.e. candidate-level) studies on this topic. This gap calls for a new analysis as open-list PR constitutes an arguably critical case for the assessment of the effectiveness of quotas. It is so for at least three reasons. First, unlike closed-list PR or single-member district (SMD) systems, open-list PR does

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¹ For details, see the Quota Project website: <http://www.quotaproject.org/>.

not put major constraints on voters' ability to choose between male and female candidates, nor does it limit the effectiveness of their electoral choices. The scale of an existing gender bias is thus fully visible (Htun and Jones, 2002; Jones and Navia, 1999). Second, open-list PR stimulates high levels of intra-party competition and therefore candidates' background – especially political experience and the associated name recognition – constitutes an electoral advantage (Carey and Shugart, 1995). Given women's political underrepresentation inherited from the past, such an advantage is most often enjoyed by male candidates. Therefore, it might partly suppress the positive effects of quotas on female candidates' electoral success (Schwindt-Bayer, 2009: 16). Most importantly, however, being a woman might also prove advantageous to a candidate competing under open-list PR. As open-list PR creates strong incentives to 'cultivate a personal vote' (Carey and Shugart, 1995), minority candidates of various sorts – including women – might find it easier to distinguish themselves from the crowd and target specific groups of voters (Shugart, 1994; Valdini, 2012). In a political system dominated by men, voters might also be inclined to favour female candidates in order to promote equality (Rule, 1994; Kittilson, 2006; Valdini, 2012). An installation of gender quotas and the associated increase in the number of female candidates certainly limits women's ability to attract votes based on gender, especially as the 'women-friendly' niches in the electorate are certainly finite. We thus argue throughout this paper that under open-list PR quota laws have an inherently paradoxical nature: while they are introduced to enhance women's political representation, they actually tend to magnify the exactingness of an electoral contest for an 'average' female candidate.

In this paper, we utilise a unique micro-level data set from Poland to simultaneously test the above-mentioned

characteristics of open list PR systems with gender quota laws. To this end, we focus on the 2007 and the 2011 election to the lower chamber of the parliament of Poland (the *Sejm*). Quotas were introduced before the latter election and thus we study candidates' electoral fortunes before and after the introduction of these regulations. Our point of departure is an aggregate-level observation that during the 2011 post-quota election a very large gap arose between the proportion of women among the candidates and the corresponding proportion for the elected MPs (see Fig. 1). Clearly, the introduction of quotas has resulted in a sharp increase in the number of female candidates but the increase in the number of female MPs has been rather small (note that before 2011 the proportion of women among elected MPs had been rising steadily even in the absence of quotas). While such a discrepancy between the proportion of women among candidates and the analogous proportion among the elected MPs is an entirely new phenomenon in the electoral history of post-communist Poland, it mirrors the regularities observed in other open-list PR countries that have introduced gender quotas. In this paper, we offer what we believe is a deeper look at this apparent paradox. We study the impact gender and candidate background exert on both the way candidates are ranked on party lists and on voter choice patterns. Our study shows that both the 2007 and the 2011 election saw a gender gap with respect to candidates' background, broadly conceived. Our evidence also suggests that this background was an important predictor of candidates' chances of being ranked high on their party lists and of subsequently attracting large numbers of electorate votes. More importantly, we also observe a paradoxical situation, an 'average' female candidate having had a much harder time contesting the 2011 (post-quota) election than the 2007 (pre-quota) one. This is suggestively reinforced by additional analyses showing

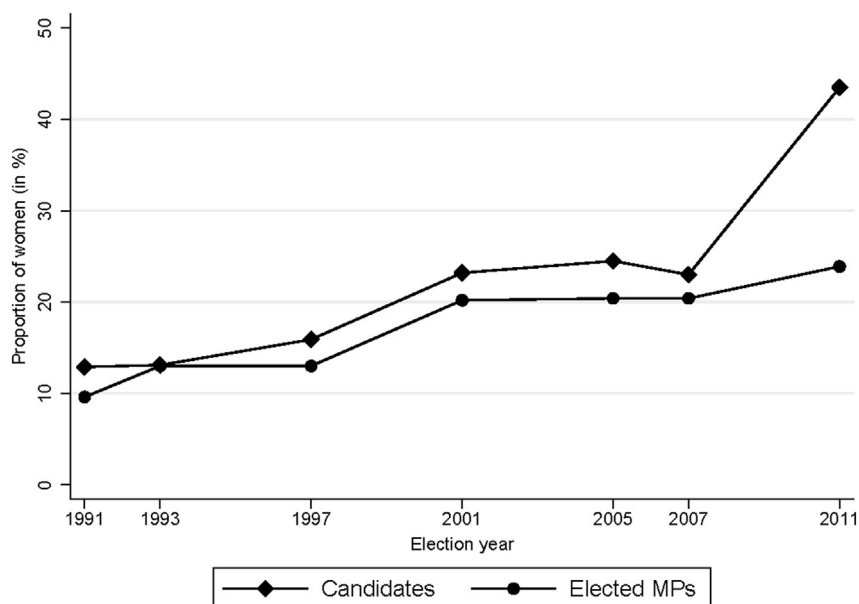


Fig. 1. Proportion of women among candidates and among members of the Polish *Sejm* (1991–2011).

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