

Gender and Political Representation

By Jennifer Rosen

The political advancement of women has implications beyond the formal significance of justice and equality. Research has shown that women are more likely than their male counterparts to steer political debates towards issues that affect women -- such as gender related violence, educational enhancements, and women's economic independenceⁱ. Additionally, democracy is enhanced when legislators represent a diversity of viewpoints and experiencesⁱⁱ. Finally, women's political visibility also has a symbolic effect, increasing women's status, and thus reducing gender inequalities more broadly throughout societyⁱⁱⁱ. The faces of national politicians generally reflect the types of people that society feels are justified to make consequential decisions.

Achieving gender balance in national governments could

- Ensure that women's interests are articulated and advocated for.
- Improve the quality of leadership and governance by bringing representative diversity
- Ensure resources are allocated for issues/policies that effect women, since public officials are often forced to make politicized decisions in deciding how to allocate scarce funds
- Provide female role models in positions of authority, which can legitimate women's roles outside of the home

Women's Political Representation

In most countries, women have secured the right to vote, organize political campaigns, participate in party structures, and ultimately be elected to political office. Actual representation in political organizations, however, remains an arena where

women are widely underrepresented and gender inequalities are surprisingly apparent. The global representation of women in national governments has improved slightly in recent years due to a variety of political, cultural, and socioeconomic changes.

	In 1999	In 2014
Percent of parliamentary seats held by women (global)	13.1%	21.8%
Number of countries with >30% female representation in party positions.	8	38

Uneven Progress

While the situation for female legislators has improved over the years, there are substantial differences across countries, and progress has moved much faster in some places than others. Many countries have achieved little progress. From 1992 to 2014, the percent of women in parliament in:

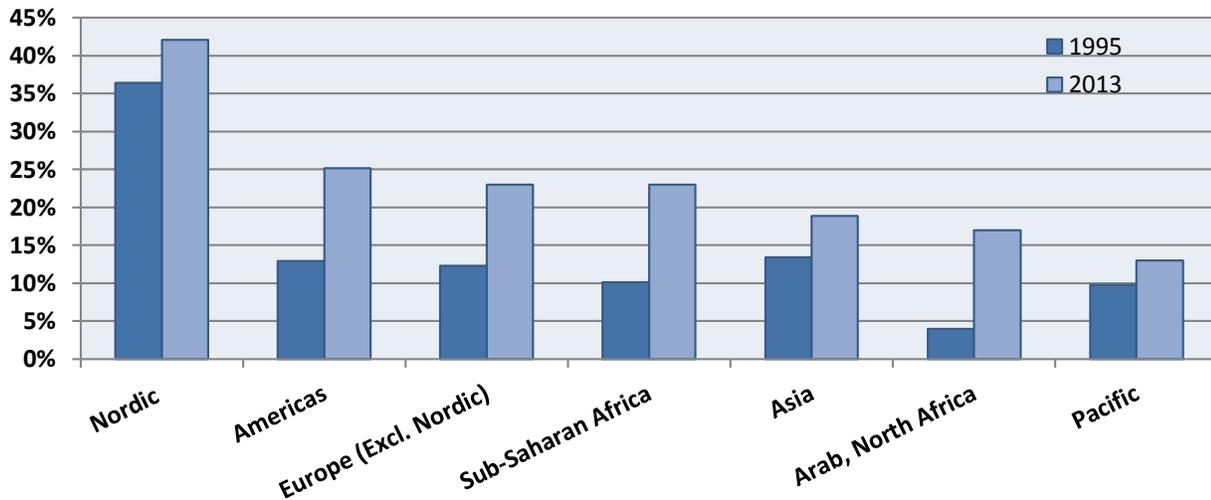
- Brazil went from 7.4% to 8.6%
- India went from 6.9% to 11.4%,
- Russia went from 8.7% to 13.6%,
- The United States went from 11% to a slightly more impressive 18.3%.

By contrast, countries such as Angola, Mozambique, Tanzania, Uganda, Nicaragua, Ecuador, and Argentina have seen women's parliamentary representation nearly triple over the past two decades, to well over 30%. In fact, in 2008 Rwanda became the first country to achieve a female majority national legislature, and women now hold 63.8% of the national legislative seats.

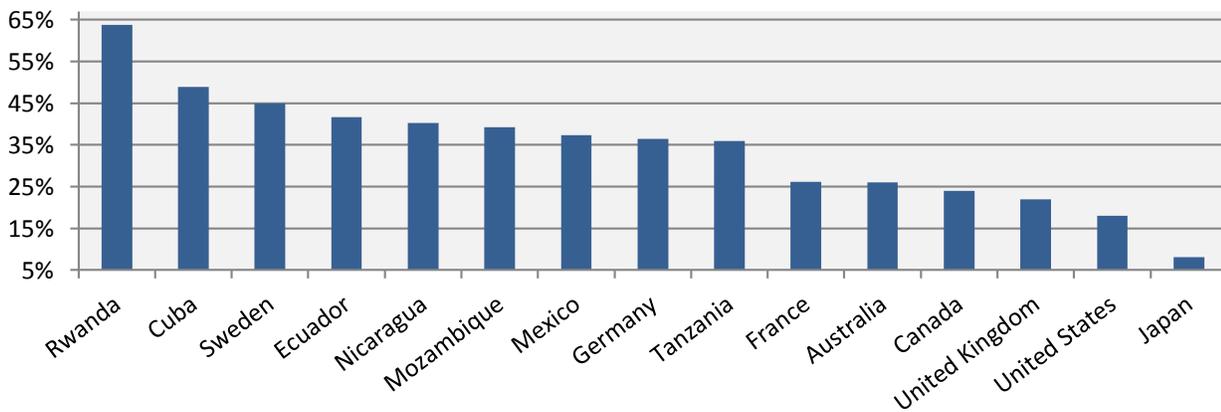
There are some patterns in this uneven progress. Twenty years ago, countries with the highest concentrations of women in parliament were all Scandinavian or Western European. Today:

- 12 of the top 20 spots are represented by less developed countries
- Twenty-four of those thirty-eight countries with female representation over 30% are characterized by the World Bank as developing and least developed countries
- This seems to be in contrast to what we know about the connection between women's status and economic development, which would have us expect that women are more likely to win political office in developed countries.

Percent of Women in Lower or Single Houses of Parliament by Region, 1995 and 2014



Select Countries January 2014



Major Factors Effecting Women's Presence in National Political Organizations

There is a rich tradition of social science research analyzing political, socioeconomic, and cultural factors to explain the substantial cross-national variations in women's representation. The explanatory factors generally fall into one of three categories: political, socioeconomic, and ideological/cultural variables.

The Political Structure

Women's ability to actually get elected is structured by the nature of the political system and institutional differences across political systems shape the level of demand for female candidates. The structure of political parties, government regimes, and electoral systems play a large role in shaping the demand for female candidates. If party

leaders believe that their party will win more seats by nominating women -- that there is a demand for female candidates -- then they are more likely to do so. On the other hand, if they think that nominating women will hurt their party, they are more likely to run an all-male slate of candidates^{iv}. Research generally shows that left-leaning parties are more committed to sending women to parliament than their conservative counterparts^v. In Scandinavia, it was Left parties that began promoting women's representation, leading women's enhanced representation to where it stands today.

A proportional representation (PR) electoral system

PR electoral systems have been highlighted by most scholars as a fundamental factor predicting cross-national variations in women's parliamentary representation^{vi}. In these systems, votes are cast for political parties or a party's list of candidates, and

the seats won is proportionate to the percentage of votes received (e.g., if a party receives 30% of the votes they fill 30% of parliamentary seats). In contrast to **majoritarian systems** where parties put forward a single candidate and therefore have an incentive to appeal to the lowest-common denominator of voter preferences, parties in PR systems field multiple candidates and benefit by appealing to a diverse cross-section of voters. According to Paxton (1997), a PR system may buffer women by making them less risky candidates in comparison to a majoritarian system where female candidates stand in direct competition with men.

Some researchers argue that democratic institutions, development, and industrialization are all associated with higher levels of women in politics. However, more recently, the introduction of **gender quotas** have enabled women in non-democratic countries with low levels of development and industrialization to make serious political gains. Gender quotas act as affirmative action policies intended to help women overcome obstacles to their election such as less political experience, cultural stereotypes, and/or incumbency. Some countries, such as Rwanda, Tanzania, Ecuador, and Nicaragua mandate a minimum percentage of candidates that must be women and/or a minimum number of legislative seats that must go to women. This has enabled women to bypass what used to be obstacle to winning a political party's nomination or being elected to office.

The Social Structure

Women's position in society is closely related to whether there is a pool of qualified female candidates available to stand for election. The family, education system, labor force, and other social institutions can be structured in a way that either empowers women or keeps them from gaining the skills and experience needed to run for office.

Political elites often have higher education levels and connections to professional labor sectors. Whether or not women have access to economic and social capital influences whether they will have the skills and experiences required of political officials.

Ideological/Cultural Structure

Culture and ideology affect both whether there are a sufficient number of qualified female candidates and whether or not voters will support a female candidate^{vii}. What people think about women -- their capabilities, rationality, and appropriate "place" in society -- matters for their ability to get elected to national legislatures^{viii}. Cultural beliefs can influence women's access to education, professional experience, and both financial and social capital -- all of which affect the supply of women in a pool of potential candidates. If societal norms persuasively associate women with the home and family, a woman entering the political sphere can be viewed as a threat to the country's moral fabric.

In many countries, national gender quotas have produced gains in a single election cycle that women's rights advocates in Scandinavia toiled for nearly half a century to achieve. Additionally, some researchers argue that in contexts of conservative cultures that hold more traditional gender role ideologies, those women that represent "ideal womanhood" may be more likely to be seen as acceptable political symbols. Therefore, where gender roles tend to idealize women as wives and mothers, those more traditional women may be considered better candidates for political office, rendering social structure variables less important.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Organizations

National Democratic Institute
<https://www.ndi.org/womens-political-participation>
Inter-Parliamentary Union
<http://www.ipu.org/english/home.htm>
Global Database of Quotas for Women
<http://www.quotaproject.org/>
Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
<http://www.idea.int/>
UN Women
<http://www.unwomen.org/>

Books and Articles

Alcantara Costa, A. 2010. "Quotas: A Pathway of Political Empowerment?" *Institute of Development Studies Bulletin*. 41(2): 18-27.
Baldez, Lisa. 2004. "Elected Bodies: The Gender Quota Law for Legislative Candidates in Mexico." *Legislative Studies Quarterly*. 24(2): 231-258.
Ballington, Julie and Azza Karam (eds). 2005. *Women in*

- Parliament: Beyond Numbers*. Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.
- Bauer, Gretchen and Hannah Britton (eds.). 2006. *Women in African Parliaments*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Dahlerup, Drude (ed). 2006. *Women, Quotas and Politics*. New York: Routledge Research in Comparative Politics.
- Dahlerup, Drude and Lenita Freidenvall. 2005. "Quotas as a 'Fast Track' to Equal Representation for Women: Why Scandinavia is no longer the Model." *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. 7(1): 26-48.
- Del Campo, Esther. 2005. "Women and Politics in Latin America: Perspectives and Limits of the Institutional Aspects of Women's Political Representation." *Social Forces*. 83(4): 1697-1725.
- Fallon, Kathleen, Liam Swiss, and Jocelyn Viterna. 2012. "Resolving the Democracy Paradox: Democratization and Women's Legislative Representation in Developing Nations, 1975-2009." *American Sociological Review*. 77(3): 380-408.
- Franceschet, Susan, Mona Lena Krook, and Jennifer Piscopo (eds). 2012. *The Impact of Gender Quotas*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Goetz, Amy and Shireen Hassim (eds.). 2005. *No Shortcuts to Power, African Women in Politics and Policy Making*. London: Zed Books.
- Hughes, Melanie. 2009. "Armed Conflict, International Linkages, and Women's Parliamentary Representation in Developing Nations." *Social Problems*. 56(1): 174-204.
- Inglehart, Ronald and Pippa Norris. 2003. *Rising Tide: Gender Equality and Cultural Change around the World*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Krook, Mona Lena. 2009. *Quotas for Women in Politics: Gender and Candidate Selection Reform Worldwide*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Krook, Mona Lena and Sarah Childs (eds.). 2010. *Women, Gender, and Politics: A Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Matland, Richard and Kathleen Montgomery. 2003. *Women's Access to Political Power in Post-Communist Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Paxton, Pamela and Melanie Hughes. 2013. *Women, Politics, and Power: A Global Perspective*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Phillips, Anne. 1995. *The Politics of Presence*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Reynolds, Andrew. 1999. "Women in the Legislatures and Executives of the World: Knocking at the Highest Glass Ceiling." *World Politics*. 51(4): 547-572.
- Rosen, Jennifer. 2013. "The Effects of Political Institutions on Women's Political Representation: A Comparative Analysis of 168 Countries from 1992 to 2010." *Political Research Quarterly* 66(2): 306-321.
- Schwindt-Bayer, Leslie. 2010. *Political Power and Women's Representation in Latin America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tripp, Aili Mari. 2000. *Women and Politics in Uganda*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Tripp, Aili Mari and Alice Kang. 2008. "The Global Impact of Quotas: On the Fast Track to Increased Female Legislative Representation." *Comparative Political Studies*. 41(3): 338-361.
- Yoon, Mi Yung. 2001. "Democratization and Women's Legislative Representation in Sub-Saharan Africa." *Democratization*. 8(2): 169-190.

ⁱ Bauer and Britton 2006; Dahlerup 2006; Hughes 2009; Kenworthy and Malami 1999; Lovenduski and Norris 2004; Matland and Taylor 1997; Reynolds 1999; Sainsbury 2004

ⁱⁱ Carroll 2001; Celis et al 2008; Crowley 2004; Dahlerup 2010; Lovenduski and Norris 2004; Norris 2008; Phillips 1995; Reingold 2008; Reynolds 2013; Tolleson-Rinehart 2001; Waylen 2008

ⁱⁱⁱ Chafetz 1990; Hughes 2009; Paxton 1997; Paxton and Hughes 2007

^{iv} Matland and Montgomery 2003

^v Hughes 2009; Kenworthy and Malami 1999; Paxton and Hughes 2007; Reynolds 1999; Rule 1987

^{vi} Kenworthy and Malami 1999; Matland 1998; Paxton 1997; Reynolds 1999; Rule 1987; Viterna et al 2008

^{vii} Matland and Montgomery 2003; Norris and Lovenduski 2010; Paxton and Hughes 2007; Paxton and Kunovich 2003, 2005; Ritter 2007

^{viii} Paxton and Hughes 2007