Gender Quotas and Women's Political Empowerment

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Recent years have witnessed dramatic changes in women's access to elected office. Although women continue to constitute only 19% of all parliamentarians worldwide, a growing number of countries have seen the election of more gender-balanced national parliaments. In September 2008, most notably, Rwanda became the first state in the world to elect more women than men to its lower house (56%). Other countries in the world's top-10 include Sweden (47%), South Africa (45%), and Costa Rica (39%), revealing that these changes are a global trend. However, not all countries have experienced major breakthroughs. Established democracies like France (19%) and the United States (17%) hover merely at or below the world average level. The 2010 elections in the United Kingdom brought a record number of women to the House of Commons (22%), but this reflected only a modest increase over previous election results. Despite these ongoing variations, questions related to diversity and representativity have been raised increasingly in political discussions around the world.

The impetus behind most of these changes and debates has been the widespread adoption of electoral gender quota policies. These take the form of reserved seats, setting aside positions that men are not eligible to contest; party quotas, adopted voluntarily by individual political parties; and legislative quotas, passed by legislatures requiring that all parties nominate a certain proportion of women. Quotas of one type or another now exist in more than 100 countries around the globe, the overwhelming majority having appeared in just the last 15 years. Their rapid diffusion is puzzling given the controversial nature of quotas, especially in light of charges that they are unfair to men and undermine 'merit' as a criterion for candidate selection.

Quota adoption has been explained in various cases with reference to mobilization by women's groups, strategies of political elites, values of equality and representation, and international norms and transnational effects. At the same time, however, quotas have not met with equal rates of success: some policies have produced dramatic increases, while others have led to stagnation and even decreases in the numbers of women elected. To account for these variations, observers have pointed to factors like policy design, fit with other electoral institutions, and the presence or absence of political will to implement quota provisions (Krook 2009).

However, the spread of quotas is not simply linked to concerns to increase women's political presence. Supporters suggest that such measures will increase diversity among the types of women elected, raise attention to women's issues in policy-making, change the gendered nature of the public sphere, and inspire female voters to become more politically involved. At the same time, opponents express concerns that quotas will facilitate access for 'unqualified' women, bring individuals to office with little interest in promoting women's concerns, reinforce stereotypes about women's inferiority as political actors, and deter ordinary women's political participation. These contrasting expectations indicate that quotas may have a host of positive and negative effects, above and beyond their impact on the numbers of women elected.

These claims speak to the broader meaning of quotas, and more specifically, whether or not they actually empower women politically. The available evidence, while sparse, points in various directions. In terms of the kinds of women elected, some studies show that quotas lead to the recruitment of elite women, especially those with ties to powerful men, and women with close loyalties to their parties. Others find, however, that quotas promote greater diversity in

candidate selection, with those benefiting from quotas being relatively young and often coming from marginalized groups. Almost all observe that the women who accede to office via quotas have less overall political experience than their non-quota counterparts, both male and female. While this might be taken as evidence that quota women are less 'qualified', it might also be viewed in the light of the fact that the exclusion of women from electoral politics has not afforded them the opportunity to accumulate similar levels of political experience. Further, many of these women bring with them backgrounds in community organizing, suggesting that women may simply have different kinds of political experience.

Looking at effects on policy-making, data on quota campaigns indicates that the introduction of quotas may change expectations about what female legislators can – and should – do. Most advocates make their case for quotas on the grounds that politics would change as a result of women's increased inclusion. They argue that policy-making would shift as a result of women's distinct policy priorities and, by allowing new voices into policy debates, would foster enhanced democratic legitimacy and good governance. Because women elected via quotas are elected because they are women, these debates may trigger a 'mandate effect', leading citizens to anticipate that 'quota women' are more likely than their non-quota counterparts to promote women's concerns. At the same time, however, the application of quotas may also generate a 'label effect', as quota women may seek to overcome the negative connotations of quotas by ignoring women's issues – or face stigmatization by other legislators due to their mode of selection, undercutting their legislative initiatives (Franceschet and Piscopo 2008).

Initial research lends support to both of these intuitions. On the one hand, women elected through quotas have reported feeling obligated to act for women as a group, which has inspired them to bring new issues to the political agenda. On the other hand, others have sought to disassociate themselves from the quota and women's issues to demonstrate that they are 'serious' politicians. At the same time, many have been accused of acting only as proxies for male relatives and of being excessively loyal to party leaders. Both of these trends – deliberate lack of attention to women's issues and blind adherence to the policy priorities of political sponsors – lead to inattention to women's concerns in the policy process. These dynamics, however, are again rooted in women's lack of experience and presence in the political sphere. When quotas are introduced in a context where women have largely been absent, and especially where political life is governed by dynamics of patronage, quota women often do not have the skills or resources that would make them less vulnerable to manipulation. In some cases, further, quota women may need to tread carefully in response to harassment, intimidation, or security concerns.

A final set of effects concerns the impact of quotas on public attitudes and trends in mass mobilization. The starting point for both is what feminists refer to as the public/private divide, which associates men with the public sphere of politics and the economy and women with the private realm of home and family (Elshtain 1981). By encouraging women to participate in politics, quota introduction may legitimize women as political actors, altering traditional gendered views. Some evidence bolsters this claim by showing that exposure to female leaders as a result of quotas can weaken gender stereotypes, a well as eliminate negative bias in how the performance of female leaders is perceived among male constituents. Other work reveals, however, that outward acceptance of the legitimacy of quotas often masks continued resistance. This is especially true among male elites, many of whom attribute women's under-representation to choices made by individual women, rather than to structural patterns of discrimination.

Along related lines, the election of more women through quotas may signal inclusiveness and provide new role models, inspiring ordinary women to get more politically involved. Various case studies find, for example, that quotas increase the rate at which female voters contact their political representatives. Others find, further, that the adoption of quotas has the effect of encouraging women to begin a political career, acquire political skills, and develop sustained political ambitions. At the same time, it may also help build support for women's movement organizing. By way of contrast, however, a number of other scholars conclude that quotas have little or no effect on women's political activities, such as their willingness to sign petitions or participate in protests. Even more troubling, some suggest that quotas may be associated with the decreased strength and increased repression of women's groups.

While these findings are tentative, some broad conclusions may be drawn. Quotas are a diverse set of measures that

can reach the political agenda for both feminist and non-feminist reasons, leading to diverse effects on the election and empowerment of women. More systematic research is clearly needed in order to determine their impact on women as a group. Nonetheless, evidence from around the world indicates that there *is* a need for gender quotas. However, it is vital that scholars and activists seek to better understand where they come from, how they are designed, and what positive and negative effects they may have in order to ensure that quotas best serve women as a group.

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