

SUMMARY

Gender quotas are increasingly being used throughout the world as a policy tool to improve women's participation in politics. While in many cases these policies have succeeded in increasing the number of women politicians, there is a lack of evidence on how exposure to women leaders impacts the beliefs of the average voter. In order to determine the causal effect of affirmative action policies on voter attitudes and electoral outcomes, a study in West Bengal uses a novel approach to look at the effect of mandated reservation in Indian village councils. The study takes advantage of the fact that villages were randomly assigned the reservation policy, and uses speeches and vignettes experiments as well as Implicit Association Tests (IATs) to analyze this issue. The results suggest that repeated exposure to women leaders reduces voter bias against them, and that repeated reservation significantly improves electoral outcomes in the medium term.



WOMEN IN POLITICS: QUOTAS, VOTER ATTITUDES AND FEMALE LEADERSHIP

By Rohini Pande and Alexandra Cirone

Which political institutions best represent the diverse policy interests of a population is a question of critical importance for both academics and policy makers. Gender is the one demographic divide that exists in every society. However, its relevance for institutional design has become prominent only recently, and to a large extent this has been propelled by women gaining equal rights to enter, and participate in, politics in most countries.

However, while the number of women politicians has significantly increased, especially since 1990, the proportion of women in national assemblies worldwide remains below parity – as of May 2008, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the average percentage of women in national assemblies was 18.4 percent.¹ Women's participation in politics varies drastically by region as well, with the Nordic countries seeing a high average of 41 percent and the Arab states only ten percent.²

A growing literature suggests that institutional barriers, cultural norms, and voter discrimination are challenges for aspiring women candidates.³ Women may face legislation that perpetuates gender discrimination and varying degrees of democracy within their electoral processes. Women may have less opportunity to obtain the education

and political experience necessary to run a successful campaign, as well as limited access to financial resources and party support.⁴

Current research also suggests, along with other reasons, that women's access to public office may be restricted by voter bias that favors male politicians. Voters may view women as less experienced and less effective in the political arena, or hold preexisting attitudes that associate leadership with men. As a result, they may be less likely to vote for female candidates. Any combination of these reasons could create substantial barriers to female participation in politics.

Determining the causal effect of affirmative action policies on voter attitudes is not easy. Citizens in countries that choose to adopt quota policies most likely have different attitudes concerning women in politics than citizens in countries that do not implement quotas. Therefore, comparing the electoral outcomes of countries with quotas to countries without quotas could be confounding the effect of preexisting voter attitudes. To combat this problem, recent research has focused on experiments that take advantage of randomization of quota policies across villages or regions. As a result, researchers can show that these regions or villages had no statistically significant differences prior to the



implementation of the quota, and therefore can determine the casual effect of the policy.

Such evidence is key in determining the true efficacy of gender quotas. This policy brief looks at the rationale behind quota policies, and discusses a study in West Bengal, India, that exploits randomized implementation of gender quotas to demonstrate that quota-induced exposure to female politicians can improve both voter attitudes towards women leaders and electoral outcomes for women candidates.

GENDER QUOTAS

Affirmative action policies such as electoral gender quotas are one way in which policy makers have sought to break down these barriers. This specific type of quota aims to ensure that women constitute a certain number or percentage of a political body, such as a legislative assembly or political party, in order to reach a “critical mass” of women anywhere from 20-40 percent (typically, a number high enough to have a say in decision making).⁹ Such policies can be legally mandated or voluntary and, as a result, take many forms: reserved legislator seats and voluntary quotas for political party nomination lists are two examples.

Quotas can also be applied to a variety of levels of government and their effects vary under different electoral systems, although current research states that quotas are most easily introduced in proportional representation (PR) systems.¹⁰ The rationale for such policies is that they are temporary, and used to alter features of the political landscape that one may hope to change over time, such as institutional barriers or party/voter discrimination, in order to increase the female presence in politics. By exposing voters to a certain number or percentage of women leaders, quotas can update the beliefs of voters regarding women candidates and reduce potential biases against them, thereby improving electoral prospects.

The efficacy of these policies is still disputed by many policy makers. Some see such policies as undemocratic or responsible for less effective leaders, and some worry that quotas may have a backlash effect. Others see them as a way to correct preexisting gender inequalities and remove access barriers to politics for half of the world’s population. More evidence is needed to truly evaluate the impact of these policies.

WOMEN AS POLITICAL LEADERS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Closing the economic and political gender gap is a pressing policy issue for the Arab world.⁵ In terms of female legislators, overall the Arab region has one of the lowest participation rates of women in politics. As of 2008, the Arab states have an average of 9.1 percent of women parliamentarians, compared to a world average of 18.4 percent.⁶ However, this varies drastically by country – the United Arab Emirates, for example, has 22.5 percent of its parliament seats occupied by women, while a handful of countries have no women parliamentarians.⁷

A number of countries in the Middle East have introduced affirmative action policies in politics, and currently Iraq, Israel, Jordan, and the Occupied Palestinian Territories all have gender quotas (see appendix). While the percentage of women parliamentarians varies – from a low of 4.7 percent in Lebanon to a high of 25.5 percent in Iraq – these are important steps in increasing women’s participation in the region.⁸ However, questions remain: Will quotas create a backlash among voters? Will quotas help women win elections in unreserved positions?

Quotas: An Introduction		
	Legislative/Constitutional Quotas	Political Party Quotas
Definition	Instituted as part of a country's constitution or electoral law; mandates that the political system puts forth a certain percentage of candidates ("candidate quotas") and/or reserves a certain number of seats for women ("reserved seats").	Voluntarily adopted and implemented by political parties; targets aspiring women candidates by ensuring that a certain percentage of women candidates are nominated.
Advantages	Applies to all parties within a political system; can be a transparent and effective way for a government to immediately increase women's participation.	Adoption of quotas by one party can lead to widespread adoption in the country, and political parties have been successfully encouraged to adopt such policies by international political party groups.
Disadvantages	Varying levels of compliance and enforcement of quotas weaken effectiveness of policy; may require additional measures to ensure that women are equally represented on party lists.	Only focuses on nomination, and as a result there is no guarantee that women will be put forth by the party or elected by voters. Also, only applies to parties that voluntarily adopt a quota.
Regional Preferences	<i>Candidate Quotas:</i> Latin America, Balkans <i>Reserved Seats:</i> Arab region, South Asia, Africa	The "West," Nordic region, Africa, Balkans

Source: Drude Dahlerup, ed. *Women, Quotas and Politics*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006.

ARE QUOTAS EFFECTIVE?

Are quotas effective in improving women's lot in politics? First and foremost, gender quotas do ensure a minimum level of female representation, and countries with quotas, on average, have a higher percentage of women legislators.¹⁵ However, increasing only the base number of women is a small part of the story. Researchers are also analyzing the other ways in which quotas can affect politics, sometimes with conflicting results. For example, Fréchette, et al. (2008) found that gender quotas and voter bias increased the incumbency advantage for male leaders if elected through a single-member district majority rule,¹⁶ while Krook, Murray and Opello (2008) found that while voters in France express favorable attitudes toward female leaders, political parties play a role in limiting female electoral success.¹⁷

It is also not easy to disentangle the many effects that affirmative action policies may have on women's participation in politics and voter attitudes. Are women failing to be elected because they are less effective than male leaders, or do voters historically have more information on male leaders and therefore assume that male leaders are better? Are voter attitudes shaped by a bias against the idea of a women leader, or in response to the behavior of previous ineffective women leaders?

The past decade has seen a large increase in the number of women politicians and the number of countries implementing electoral quotas for women – however, women's participation still fluctuates widely by country, and researchers have only begun to determine when quota policies are successful and why. Rigorous



DO WOMEN POLITICIANS MATTER?

Assuming equal qualifications, does the gender of a politician matter? More specifically, do men and women politicians have different policy preferences? A number of studies suggest this is the case. Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) found that among village councilors in India, women and men had different policy preferences. Women invest more in goods preferred by women, and their policy preferences align more closely with the preferences of women villagers.¹¹ Rehavi (2007) shows that the gender of US state legislators differentially shapes policy preferences and spending on a subset of issues, such as healthcare and corrections institutions.¹² Evidence like this implies that with the current lack of women leaders, half the population's policy preferences may be underrepresented.

Also, even more significantly, current research suggests that women politicians are equal to or better than their male counterparts. Duflo and Topalova (2004), for example, find that women leaders provide more public goods for their villages than men, and that these goods are of higher quality.¹³ Women politicians are also less likely to take bribes. Dollar, Fisman and Gatti (2001) also find that, across many countries, higher levels of female representation in parliament bring lower levels of corruption.¹⁴ This suggests that not only are women leaders needed to reflect the policy preferences of women voters, but that they may be more effective in doing so.

empirical evaluation is needed to determine through what channels quotas shape voter attitudes and behavior towards women candidates.

QUOTAS AND VOTER ATTITUDES: THE CASE OF WEST BENGAL

The evidence shows that quotas increase the number of women in politics. However, these types of policies are designed to be short- to medium-term solutions. As a result, it is also important to examine if and how gender quotas affect the attitudes of voters towards women politicians. Updating voter beliefs and combating stereotypes about women leaders are policy goals that would be much more durable than a temporary influx in numbers.

One recent study uses a novel approach to examine how mandated reservation affects voter perception of women leaders in the Indian state of West Bengal.¹⁸ Political reservation was introduced to the state in 1998, and since then one-third of leader positions (*Pradhans*) in

village councils (*Gram Panchayats*, or GPs) in the state have been reserved for women.

The study takes advantage of the fact that GPs were randomly assigned a reservation policy in both 1998 and 2003, and determines the causal impact of mandated exposure on electoral outcomes as well as villager attitudes and perceptions towards women leaders. Researchers looked at data regarding electoral outcomes of women in the two elections after reservation in up to six West Bengal districts. They also looked at how quotas impact voter attitudes toward female leaders by collecting data on voters' explicit perceptions of both gender roles and female leader effectiveness, as well as voters' implicit taste for female leaders. A novel feature of this analysis was the use of two key instruments developed and widely used in social psychology, but seldom in economics: experiments using speeches and vignettes about hypothetical leaders, and Implicit Association Tests (IATs).

TOOLS OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY AND HOW THEY WERE APPLIED IN WEST BENGAL

Speech Experiment: In a basic speech experiment, each subject listens to an identical tape-recorded speech. However, the gender of the speaker is randomly varied for each participant. After listening, the subject is asked to evaluate the speech. In the West Bengal study, villagers evaluated the effectiveness of hypothetical leaders by listening to one of six speeches (three per gender) in which a village leader was responding to a complaint about public good provision. For each villager, the gender of the speaker was randomly varied, and after listening, villagers were asked their opinions on the politician's perceived performance and effectiveness.

Vignette Experiment: A vignette experimental design presents a scenario with multiple and competing options for a resolution, and asks the participant to make a choice or evaluate a choice made at the end of the scenario. In the West Bengal Study, each villager heard a vignette in which a situation of resource scarcity was described, and the leader in the situation chose to invest in either a drinking water or irrigation project. Both the gender of the leader and the choice made was varied for each participant, and after listening the participant was asked to evaluate the leader's choice.

Implicit Association Test (IAT): The IAT relies on the idea that respondents who more easily pair two concepts in a computer-based rapid categorization task more strongly associate those concepts. In cases where the subject population is illiterate, pictures or sounds can be used to represent the concepts being tested. When viewing the screen, the participant sees a sequence of stimuli (words or pictures) and uses a computer button to assign each stimulus to either side of the screen (each side representing one category). The time it takes to assign the stimuli to a category is recorded. In the West Bengal study, villagers were given two types of computer-based IATS: the first measured the strength of association between images of anonymous male/female and normative categories of good and bad, and the second measured how villages associate gender with leadership and domestic tasks.

For a demonstration of these methods, see <http://www.povertyactionlab.org/projects/project.php?pid=102>.

QUOTAS AND ELECTORAL OUTCOMES

The fraction of unreserved ward council seats contested and won by women in never-reserved GPs in Birbhum was just five percent, and the number remains similarly low among GPs which had been reserved only once (in either 1998 or 2003). The key finding of the research is that in villages that were reserved for the previous two electoral cycles (ten years), women made significant electoral gains as a result of the reservation policy. The results indicate a doubling of the fraction of female ward seat contestants and winners in GPs that had been reserved over the last two elections.¹⁹

This increase could have occurred for a variety of reasons, including better mentoring of future female leaders by current female leaders and/or a role model effect. The research examined one possible channel (which may have complemented the others): changes in voter attitudes towards women leaders.

VOTER ATTITUDES

The results suggest that there is an initial bias against female leaders - females in councils reserved for the first time receive worse evaluations (relative to leaders in never-reserved councils), and in survey responses



both genders state an explicit distaste for female leaders (relative to male leaders). This explicit distaste is unaffected by reservation; if anything, the study finds that men are actually more biased in GPs reserved once. This supports a “backlash” hypothesis, in that men protest against a system that forces them to elect women by stating a dislike for female leaders, even though the implicit preferences of men are unaffected.

Results also show that this bias decreases with exposure. There is an observed improvement in leader evaluation for women who are elected councilor in councils reserved for the second time. However, this could also be a result of changes in the selection or the behavior of female leaders over time. The study therefore uses experimental data (speeches, vignettes, and IATs) to measure bias against female leaders and test if voter attitudes differ as a result of female leader exposure.

The researchers find that exposure to a female leader drastically altered male villagers’ perceptions of female leader effectiveness. Men living in villages that had never been reserved judged the hypothetical leader as significantly more effective when the leader’s gender was experimentally manipulated to be male (rather than female). The evaluation gap disappears in currently or previously reserved villages. However, among female villagers we find no significant effects as a result of the reservation policy. This is most likely a result of the fact that women villagers are significantly less likely to be exposed to politics in general.

Finally, results from the computer-based Implicit Association Test measuring gender-occupation stereotypes indicate that exposure to female leaders (through reservation) increased the likelihood that male villagers associated women with leadership activities (as opposed to domestic activities). The IAT used to measure taste (the association of men and women leaders with concepts of good

and bad), on the other hand, found a strong same gender preference that was unaffected by reservation.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The study finds evidence that voters in rural India state a preference for male leaders over female leaders. This very likely reflects social and cultural norms that suggest leadership activities are less appropriate for women than men. Such cultural norms are prevalent in many countries, and may be an important challenge for female leadership in many parts of the world.²⁰

In such settings, gender quotas that create an initial generation of female leaders may be very important. Results from Beaman et al. (2008) suggest that mandated reservation in India did not make male villagers more sympathetic to the idea of female leaders. However, it weakened the association voters drew between men and leadership, and improved their evaluation of female leader effectiveness in the experiments conducted.

This suggests that voter beliefs on effectiveness are malleable, and can be affected by exposure. These findings are in line with a growing literature; see, for instance, Clingingsmith, Khwaja and Kremer (2008) on the impact of the Islamic institution of the Hajj.²¹ In the Indian setting, evidence suggests that changes in voter beliefs can durably influence political outcomes. After two election cycles, and subsequent to the improved ratings of female leaders in the second electoral cycle, more women contest and win village council elections and are designed as leaders.

In the Arab world, a region that is still trying to increase the number of women in politics, quotas could do much to erase voter bias against women leaders. The last decade has seen an increasing awareness of both women’s rights and political participation, and many Arab countries

have taken important steps to enhance the political status of women. Much of the progress made can be attributed to government policies – such policies have either eliminated legislative discrimination or encourage women’s participation.²² These countries could build upon this support to help enforce short-term voluntary quotas for political parties, for example. Studies that are tailored to the Arab world should be initiated in order to determine the impact of female leadership on social and cultural norms regarding female leadership, and to identify the most effective policy design for quotas in the region.

Gathering empirical evidence on how individual attitudes, cultural norms about appropriate work for women, and political institutions affect participation is essential – women’s participation in democratization and development is important, and an increased political presence could positively benefit societies. Further research could examine other channels associated with electoral gender quotas. Will experienced female politicians mentor incoming female leaders? Do women leaders take on the task of being a role model, and how does this affect women’s participation in politics? Will female leaders play a role in recruiting others? ♥

ENDNOTES

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Appendix: Quotas in the Middle East			
Country	Electoral System	Quota Type	% of Women in Parliament
Iraq	List Proportional Representation (List PR)	constitutional quota, national parliament; election law quota regulation, national parliament	25.5
Israel	List Proportional Representation (List PR)	political party quota for electoral candidates	14.2
Jordan	Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV)	election law quota regulation, national parliament	6.4
Lebanon	Block Vote (BV)	quotas existed previously or quota legislation has been proposed	4.7
Occupied Palestinian Territories	Parallel	election law quota regulation, national parliament; constitutional or legislative quota, sub-national level	12.9

Source: IDEA, Global Database of Quotas for Women. Web site: <http://www.quotaproject.org/>.

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