

Female Governmental Representation in Latin America

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Women's representation in Latin American governments has increased steadily over the past twenty years (Htun and Piscopo 1). Perhaps one of the most predominate factors contributing to this increase is the implementation of gender quotas. Such regulations mandate that women must hold a certain percentage in a given governmental body. Some countries have also imposed other measures to promote women's involvement in politics, such as training programs, awareness raising, parliamentary reforms, and more (Krook 17-19). However, there are also certain cultural and societal barriers that impact women's representation. In some cases, sexist cultural attitudes towards women can further spur their exclusion from political positions (Atkeson and Kereval 733, 735). Regardless of what factors are impeding women's involvement in government, they must be eradicated. Any factor prohibiting women's participation in any sphere of public life threatens women's rights, which are, moreover, human rights. Supporting women's empowerment, be it in government or in any other area, is therefore beneficial and necessary to men and women alike.

Gender quotas are one of the most prominent factors influencing women's representation in government, particularly in Latin America. "Gender quota" is actually something of a catchall term for a variety strategies and measures aimed at increasing gender equity. In their report "Gender Quotas and Female Leadership," Ford and Pande identify three types: voluntary party quotas, candidate quotas, and reserved seats. They define each type as follows:

First, voluntary party quotas have been adopted by political parties in a number of countries and involve a party committing itself to nominating a certain percentage of female candidates for electoral lists. Second, candidate quotas are required by the law of a country and stipulate that a certain number of candidate positions must be reserved for women. They sometimes include conditions on the position of women on the electoral list, for instance

by requiring that every second entry on the list must be a woman. Finally, reserved seats are positions for which only female candidates can compete and are used as a more direct way of regulating the number of women in elected positions (Ford and Pande 8).

As of their writing in 2011, Ford and Pande state that 61% of countries employed voluntary quotas, 38% used legislated candidate quotas, and 20% had reserved seats (8). Furthermore, it appears that the types of quotas imposed often vary from region to region due to the wide variation in political systems and their histories (Ford and Pande 8). Thus, the effectiveness of gender quotas is in part dependent on both the type of quota implemented as well as the region and government it is implemented in.

Gender quotas were first conceived in 1990 by the UN Economic and Social Council. In response to the rising awareness of and movements for women's rights, the Council "set a target of 30% female representation in decision-making bodies by 1995" (Ford and Pande 8). Five years later, the UN Beijing Conference on Women expanded this vision by calling for all national governments to "ensure equal representation of women at all decision-making levels in national and international institutions" (Ford and Pande 8). Following these conferences, gender quotas began to appear across the world as a viable means of increasing women's governmental representation. Portions of the business world are even stepping up to further women's rights by imposing corporate gender quotas as well (Ford and Pande 10). Governmental gender quotas are therefore not only having a positive impact on the representation women in politics (but not necessarily their rights) but are also beginning to influence other spheres of life as well.

In the past two decades, there has been an overall increase in women's share of parliamentary seats in Latin America. The percentages have risen from 9% in 1990, to 13% in 2000, to 18% in 2010, and to 20% in 2014 (Htun and Piscopo 1). By comparison, the world average of women holding parliamentary seats in 2014 was 22.1% ("Women in Parliament: 20 years in review"). This steady increase is due, in part, to gender quotas. Between 1990 and 1999, thirteen Latin American countries adopted gender quotas, and between 2000 and 2014, seven more countries followed their lead (however, Venezuela repealed the quota in 1997, the same year it was enacted, and Colombia repealed their quota in 1998, although they readopted it in 2013) (Htun and Piscopo 10-11). The quotas ranged from requiring anywhere from 30% to 50% of either the lower or unicameral houses (or both, in some cases) being occupied by women (Htun and Piscopo 10-11). "Women's share of the single or lower house of parliament was nearly 25 percent in

countries with quota laws, compared to 21 percent in countries without them” (Htun and Piscopo 11).” Thus, by observing the data, it becomes apparent that gender quotas are an influential factor in increasing women’s representation in various Latin American parliaments.

However, it is also important to acknowledge that gender quotas often have uneven results. “Their effectiveness depends on additional factors, including the type of electoral system, the details of the quota law, and the vigorousness of implementation” (Htun and Piscopo 12). For example, Mexico and Bolivia have experienced an issue known as “*acoso politico por razón de género*,” or “gender-based political assault” (Htun and Piscopo 13). This term denotes party leaders who have forced female legislators to resign their positions so that their male alternates may take their place (Htun and Piscopo 13). While the practice is often banned through legal sanctions, this does not always stop it from occurring. Male legislators have also been known, in some cases, to pass off less important or impactful legislation to their female counterparts, thus preventing women from working on bills that would benefit women’s rights (Htun and Piscopo 24-25). Thus, governments must be careful and conscientious in their design and implementation of gender quotas.

Latin America is not the only region that has adopted gender quotas and subsequently seen improvements in women’s parliamentary representation. From 1995 to 2017, the world average of women in parliament has increased from 11.3% to 23.3% (“Women in Parliament in 2016: The year in review”). Of the world’s 195 countries, 128 currently have some type of gender quota in place (“Country overview”). It can thus be concluded that, among other factors, gender quotas have had a positive impact not only on women’s governmental representation in Latin America, but around the world as well. However, as will later be proven in this paper, the institution of gender quotas does not necessarily mean that women’s voices are heard and taken seriously.

Furthermore, gender quotas are not the only measure that are improving women’s governmental representation. For example, some governments have established gender equality committees focused specifically on developing women-friendly legislation. In her report “Gender and Elections: Temporary Special Measures Beyond Quotas,” Krook identifies some of these committees’ tasks as including “generating legislation, providing oversight for bills proposed in other committees, monitoring the implementation of laws, requesting briefings from ministers and government departments, and conducting study tours” (19). Eighty-six countries around the world have one or more of such committees

dedicated to women and gender equality (Krook 19). If implemented and run properly with genuine intentions, every country could undoubtedly benefit from such committees. Another measure taken to improve women’s representation in government is gender-specific research and training. The aim of such measures is to support female legislators and women-friendly policy making actions (Krook 17). Two examples of such efforts have been established in Mexico and Costa Rica. In 2005, Mexico established the Research Center for Women’s Advancement and Gender Equality “to provide specialized technical support and analytical information services” (Krook 17). The Center works with both men and women to support its goals. Costa Rica established a similar center in 2009, called the Technical Unit on Gender Equality and Equity. This body works to “provide gender training to staff, provide expert advice, and coordinate with civil society” (Krook 18). Mexico has also established Partido Acción Nacional (the National Action Party, or PAN), an organization that runs seminars, workshops, forums, and courses for female political candidates in an effort to “level the political playing field” (Krook 23). El Salvador has a similar program, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, which sends money from the budget party to the Ministry of Women, which, similar to PAN, uses it for training and national assemblies for party women (Krook 23). These are but a few of the ways in which measures beyond gender quotas are being introduced and implemented to improve not only women’s representation in government, but women’s rights in general.

When considering the factors in place to improve women’s representation and impact in government, it is not enough to look at what steps have been taken. The results of such steps must be examined as well. For instance, a study conducted in Argentina examined whether or not women’s presence actually changed legislative behavior. The researchers conducted their study from 1983 to 2007, observing the rates of women in congress throughout the years, the amount of gender-based legislation that was presented (by both men and women), and what, if any, impact such legislation had (if it was passed at all). After their many years of research, the researchers concluded that “women’s presence has changed legislative behavior on women’s rights in some respects but not in others” (Htun et. al. 115). As women’s presence in congress increased, both men and women introduced more female-centric legislation, implying an increase in the discussion of gender-related issues and women’s rights. Furthermore, such gains were most prevalent after gender quotas were introduced in 2002 (Htun et. al. 115). However, this did not correlate to increased rates of female-centric legislation actually being passed. In fact, it

was found that it was more likely for such legislation to be passed when women representatives were fewer in number (Htun et. al. 115). Thus, in this instance, it was proven that although gender quotas may increase the presence of women in government, that does not necessarily mean that those women have substantial impact on legislation.

Societal sexism may also play a role in women's entry to and political success in government positions, as well as how they are perceived by the public. One study by Lonna Rae Atkeson and Yann P. Kereval conducted research on such a notion among female mayors in Mexico. They claim, "Research on gender stereotypes show that candidate gender is used to make inferences about candidate traits, ideology, issue positions, and beliefs," although stereotypes can differ by context (i.e., by country or region) (Atkeson and Kereval 733). Despite gains women have made in the public sphere due to gender quotas, these stereotypes may be one factor that prevents them from holding executive office. This absence of female executives "not only restricts political opportunities open to women but also limits their ability to advance up the career ladder as they are unlikely to seek or win an election for the most visible offices in Mexico" (Atkeson and Kereval 735). This lack of opportunity for holding public office may suggest underlying problems within Mexican society itself in regards to gender stereotypes. Even if there are women who aspire to fill leadership positions, they may not recognize their desire or be willing to act on their motivation unless they see other women filling similar positions, or are otherwise informed that these positions are open to them (Ford and Pande 7). Thus, addressing societal sexism towards women as leaders is a crucial step in advancing women's rights and ability to be fairly represented not only in government, but in society at large.

However, viewing women as political outsiders may actually, in some cases, lead to increased numbers of women in office, although not necessarily for the appropriate reasons. In their research on Latin American attitudes toward women and politics, Buice and Morgan state,

Support for women in leadership is higher among those who are frustrated with the status quo and see female candidates as outsiders with the potential for overturning entrenched hierarchies and reforming failed institutions. However, as women make gains in executive-level representation, female politicians lose their outsider status and cease offering an attractive alternative to the unsatisfactory state of affairs. Therefore for some respondents support for women in politics is not the result of firm feminist commitments,

but is conditional on distrust of existing political institutions as well as the decidedly non-feminist outcome of women's political exclusion (Buice and Morgan 660).

Thus, while women's status as political outliers may be seen as appealing to rejecting the status quo, this is a problematic viewpoint. As the research stated, in such cases, women's representation is "not the result of firm feminist commitments," but rather a form of rebellion against the existing regime (Buice and Morgan 660). Electing women only for the sake of electing women, or only for the sake of trying to prove something to the current political institution, is not truly supportive of women's involvement in government and is therefore just as much of an issue as not working to represent women at all.

Latin America has successfully increased the representation of women in government over the past several decades. Gender quotas are, perhaps, the greatest factor in this increase. Quotas help to show that governments value and support women's rights to equal representation, although it is also important to note that gender quotas alone are not effective enough to fully realize equal female representation in government. Organizations such as the Partido Acción Nacional and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front have also helped to advocate for increased representation of women in politics, as well as women's rights more generally. The continued education of gender equality is also important to eradicate the sexism still found in some Latin American societies, which in itself is another barrier affecting women's rights at large.

What steps must yet be taken to continue improving women's rights and women's representation in government? Unfortunately, there is no one simple solution. While increasing women's representation, gender quotas are not the perfect, final solution. The continued evolution of gender roles is a necessary step towards advancing women's representation in government. Women must be perceived to have the capacity for leadership. This is a step that, in part, relies on the passage of time, as well as efforts such as training programs, gender education, opportunities for women's empowerment, and so forth. Efforts must also be made to end violence against all women, not just women vying for political positions. Progress is not a given; it requires constant effort, action, and dogged persistence. Although progress towards equal representation for women in politics, as well as equal representation for women in all aspects of life, will not be an easy road, it is one that must be traveled until the end is reached. Women's rights are human rights. Men and women alike must not stop until there is equality for all people regardless of their gender.

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