Gender Quotas in Parliament: A Global View

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Women occupy 18.5 percent of the seats in national parliaments around the world (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2009). While this is a small minority of all representatives, the degree of women's exclusion from political office varies enormously across the globe. However, most countries have registered increases in recent years in the numbers of women elected. In many cases, a crucial drive for change has been the adoption of quota policies to facilitate the selection of female candidates. All the same, not all quotas are equally successful in increasing women's political representation: some countries experience dramatic increases following the adoption of new quota regulations, while others see more modest changes or even setbacks in the proportion of women elected. Further, quotas appear to have mixed results for women as a group: some have positive consequences for public policy, while others appear to undermine women as political actors.

To track and make sense of these developments, this article surveys quota policies around the world. The first section discusses electoral gender quotas as a global phenomenon. It outlines three categories of quota policies – reserved seats, party quotas, and legislative quotas – and describes their basic characteristics, the countries in which they appear, and the timing of their adoption. The second section offers four explanations for the passing of quotas related to the mobilization of women, the strategies of political elites, the norms of equality and representation, and the role of international and transnational actors. The third and fourth sections explore why some quotas are more effective than others in promoting female candidates and empowering women as a group. The analysis suggests that quotas are a diverse set of measures that do not always have their desired effects. Nonetheless, they often produce a host of positive implications – both expected and unexpected – in the pursuit of greater equality between women and men in political life.

Gender Quotas as a Global Phenomenon

Electoral gender quotas include three categories of measures: reserved seats, party quotas, and legislative quotas. Despite differences in their features and distribution across world regions, these policies share striking similarities in terms of the timing of their introduction. Before 1990, approximately twenty countries adopted gender quotas. In the 1990s, quotas appeared in more than fifty new states which have been joined by nearly forty more since the year 2000 (Krook, 2006a). As a result, today more than one hundred countries have some sort of quota policy. Because more than seventy-five percent of these measures were passed during the last fifteen years, quotas appear to reflect a growing international norm regarding the need to promote women's political



representation. The United Nations has played a central role in creating and diffusing this new norm through its commitment to women's political participation in Article 7 of the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and Strategic Objective G of the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action.

The three types of gender quotas vary in terms of their basic characteristics, the countries in which they appear, and the timing of their adoption. Reserved seats are policies that literally set aside places for women in political assemblies. They are usually enacted through constitutional reforms that establish separate electoral rolls for women, designate separate districts for female candidates, or allocate women's seats to political parties based on their proportion of the popular vote. They guarantee women's presence by revising the mechanisms of election to mandate a minimum number of female representatives. This proportion, however, is often very low: some reserved seats policies mandate as little as one or two percent of all seats, although there are important exceptions, like thirty percent policies in Rwanda and Tanzania. These measures first appeared in the 1930s in India, but have been adopted as recently as 2009 in Egypt. Indeed, they have become an increasingly prominent solution in countries with very low levels of female parliamentary representation. They are concentrated geographically in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, for example in countries like Rwanda, Uganda, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Jordan, and Afghanistan. In some states, there are no quotas at the national level, but quotas are used very effectively at the local level, as in India and Namibia.

Party quotas are measures adopted voluntarily by political parties to require a certain proportion of women among their parties' candidates. They are introduced through changes to individual party statutes and introduce new criteria for candidate selection to encourage party elites to recognize existing biases and consider alternative spheres of political recruitment. Given their origins with parties, these quotas differ from reserved seats in that they concern slates of candidates, rather than the final proportion of women elected. Further, they generally mandate a much higher proportion of women, usually between twenty-five and fifty percent of all candidates. They were first adopted in the early 1970s by various left-wing parties in Western Europe. Today they are the most common type of gender quota, appearing in parties across the political spectrum and in all regions of the world. They continue to be the most prevalent measure employed in Western Europe, for example in countries like Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. However, they also frequently coexist with legislative quotas in Latin America in states like Brazil, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico.

Legislative quotas, finally, are measures passed by national parliaments that require all parties to nominate a certain proportion of female candidates. They differ from reserved seats in that they apply to candidate lists, rather than the final proportion of women elected. Legislative quotas involve reforming the constitution or the electoral law to alter the meanings of equality and representation that inform candidate selection processes by legitimizing affirmative action and recognizing 'gender' as a political identity. Similar to party quotas, they address selection processes, rather than the number of women actually elected. Unlike party quotas, however, they are mandatory provisions that apply to all political groupings, rather than simply to those who choose to adopt quotas. Legislative quotas typically call for women to constitute between twenty-five and fifty percent of all



candidates. They are the newest type of gender quota, appearing first in the early 1990s, but have become increasingly common as more countries are adopting quota policies. With some notable exceptions, these measures tend to be found in developing countries, particularly in Latin America, for example in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, and postconflict societies, primarily in Africa, as in Burundi and Liberia; the Middle East, as in Iraq; and Southeastern Europe, as in Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Gender Quotas and Policy Adoption

The diffusion of gender quota policies raises questions about how and why these measures have been adopted in diverse countries around the world. The global reach of any policy is unusual, but the rapid spread of quotas is especially striking, considering that many people, including some feminists, voice strong and convincing objections to quotas per se as a strategy for increasing women's political representation (Bacchi, 2006). Some argue against quotas on the basis that they are undemocratic, because they violate the notion that there should be 'free choice' in who is nominated or elected to political office. Others contend that quotas are unfair because they do not allow men and women to compete openly for seats and, as such, discriminate against men. Still others claim that quotas are demeaning to women, because they suggest that women are not capable of winning office 'on their own'. In addition to this normative hostility, the diffusion of quotas is puzzling because it contradicts expectations about the role of self-interest in politics. More specifically, quotas for women appear to challenge the status of the same male politicians and party leaders who pass these policies, as they require that men cede seats to women as a group.

Quotas have nonetheless been accepted in countries around the world. A survey of these cases suggests at least four possible explanations related to who supports quota policies and why they are ultimately adopted (Krook, 2009). The first is that women mobilize for quotas to increase women's representation. Usually, this occurs when women's groups realize that quotas are an effective, and maybe the only, means for increasing women's political representation. The particular women involved in quota campaigns nonetheless vary enormously across cases and may include women's organizations inside political parties, women's movements in civil society, and even individual women close to powerful men, like first ladies or women in top party leadership positions. In all of these instances, however, women's groups pursue quotas for both normative and pragmatic reasons. They believe that there should be more women in politics, but in the absence of any 'natural', automatic trend towards change, they recognize that this is likely to be achieved only through specific, targeted actions to promote female candidates.

The second explanation is that political elites adopt quotas for strategic reasons. Various case studies suggest, for example, that party elites often adopt quotas when one of their rivals adopts them (Caul, 2001). This concern may be heightened if the party seeks to overcome a long period in opposition, having lost a long string of elections, or suffered a dramatic decrease in popularity. In other contexts, elites view quotas as a way to demonstrate some sort of commitment to women without really intending to alter existing patterns of inequality (for example, by deliberately designing very weak quota regulations), or alternatively, as a means to promote other political ends, like maintaining control over political rivals within or outside the party by using it as a pretext to remove male challengers. If these motives are correct, the adoption of quotas



may be less about empowering women in politics and more about how quotas fit in with various other struggles among male political elites.

The third explanation is that quotas are adopted when they mesh with existing or emerging notions of equality and representation. Evidence indicates that gender quotas are compatible in distinct ways with a number of normative frameworks. Some scholars view quota adoption as being consistent with ideas about equality and fair access. They point out that left-wing parties are generally more open to measures such as quotas because these match with their more general goals of social equality. Others interpret quotas as a method to recognize difference and the need for proportional representation. Quotas for women are thus a logical extension of guarantees given to other groups based on linguistic, religious, racial, and other identities. A final observation is that quotas tend to emerge during periods of democratic innovation. In these countries, quotas may be seen as a way to establish the legitimacy of the new political system during democratic transition or the creation of new democratic institutions. Taken together, these arguments analyze quotas in relation to their 'fit' with features of the political context: they do not reflect principled concerns to empower women or pragmatic strategies to win or maintain power.

The fourth explanation is that quotas are supported by international norms and spread through transnational sharing. Over the last ten years, a variety of international organizations have issued declarations recommending that all member-states aim for thirty percent women in all political bodies. These norms shape national quota debates in at least four ways (Krook, 2006b). In some cases, international actors impose quotas by deciding to apply quotas themselves when organizing new elections, or by compelling national leaders to do so themselves through heavy pressure from the international community. In other instances, local women's movements and transnational non-governmental organizations share information on quota strategies across national borders. In still others, international events provide new sources of leverage in national debates, shifting the balance in favor of local and transnational actors seek to prevent quota adoption, despite mobilization by local women's groups and transnational non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in favor of these policies, arguing that quotas do not constitute international 'best practice' for elections.

Gender Quotas and the Election of Women

Quota measures are diverse, and thus differences in their impact are to be expected. However, pinpointing why some quotas are more effective than others is a complicated task: in addition to features of specific quota policies, which affect their likelihood of being implemented, quotas are introduced when variations already exist in the percentage of women in national parliaments. Cross-national variations are thus the combined result of quotas and other political, social, and economic factors that were often at work before the quotas were established. As a result, quotas do not simply lead to gains proportional to the quota policy, but also interact, both positively and negatively, with various features of the broader political context.

In an attempt to untangle these effects, scholars outline three broad explanations related to the impact of quotas on the election of more women to political office (Krook, 2009).



The first focuses on the details of the quota measures themselves. Some studies assert that the impact of quotas is closely connected to the type of measure involved. Most agree that reserved seats generally produce small changes in women's representation, because they are often set at a very low level. Some claim that party quotas are more effective than other types of quotas because they are voluntary measures, adopted for reasons of electoral advantage, while others insist that legislative quotas are more effective because they bind all political parties, rather than merely those who choose to adopt quotas (Jones, 1998).

More recent work delves deeper into variations within and across types, seeking to understand why specific quota measures are more or less effective in achieving changes in women's representation. These scholars argue that the impact of gender quotas stems from the wording of the quota, whether the language used in the policy strengthens the quota requirement or reduces ambiguity or vagueness regarding the process of implementation (Schmidt & Saunders, 2004); the requirements of the quota, whether the policy specifies where female candidates should be placed and to which elections the policy applies (Jones, 2004; Murray, 2004); the sanctions of the quota, whether the policy establishes organs for reviewing and enforcing quota requirements and procedures for punishing or rectifying non-compliance (Baldez, 2004); and the perceived legitimacy of the quota, whether the policy is viewed as legal or constitutional from the point of view of national and international law (Russell, 2000).

A second explanation relates the impact of quotas to the 'fit' between quota measures and existing electoral institutions. Most studies in this vein focus on characteristics of the electoral system, examining how electoral rules facilitate or hinder the potentially positive effect of quotas on women's representation. They observe that quotas have the greatest impact in proportional representation electoral systems with closed lists and high district magnitudes (Matland, 2006), although they also identify idiosyncratic features of particular electoral systems that negatively affect quota implementation, including the possibility for parties to run more than one list in each district, the existence of distinct electoral systems for different types of elections, and the chance for parties to nominate more candidates than the number of seats available (Htun, 2002; Jones, 1998).

Other scholars consider features of the political party system, as well as the characteristics of parties themselves, to discern partisan dynamics that aid or subvert quota implementation. They argue that quotas are more likely to have an impact in party systems where several parties co-exist and larger parties respond to policy innovations initiated by smaller parties, as well as in parties with left-wing ideologies where the party leadership is able to enforce party or national regulations (Kittilson, 2006). Still others observe higher rates of implementation across all parties in countries where the political culture emphasizes sexual difference and group representation, and lower rates of compliance in countries where the political culture stresses sexual equality and individual representation (Inhetveen, 1999).

A third explanation, lastly, outlines the actors who support and oppose quotas and their respective roles in guaranteeing or undermining quota implementation. Much of this literature focuses on political party elites as the group most directly responsible



for variations in the impact of quotas, since the effective application of quotas largely hinges around the elites' willingness to recruit female candidates (Murray, 2004). Most accounts expose the ways that elites seek to mitigate the impact of quotas from the passive refusal to enforce quotas to more active measures used to subvert their intended effect. Such measures can go as far as committing large-scale electoral fraud and widespread intimidation of female candidates, as in Bolivia where male names were given feminine forms or in Pakistan where female candidates sometimes received death threats (Krook, 2009).

Many also mention other actors who play a direct or indirect role in enforcing quota provisions, including women's organizations both inside and outside the political parties who pressure the elites to comply with quota provisions, distribute information on quota regulations both to the elites and the general public, and train female candidates to negotiate better positions on their respective party lists (Krook, 2009); national and international courts which provide an arena to challenge non-compliance and require parties to redo lists that do not comply with the law (Jones, 2004); and ordinary citizens who engage in public scrutiny of parties' selection practices through reports and reprimands that lead the elites to honor and even exceed quota commitments (Baldez, 2004).

Gender Quotas and the Empowerment of Women

Existing patterns of quota adoption and implementation leave many skeptical that these policies will prove beneficial for women. Indeed, evidence from many cases suggests that quotas are not so much a feminist demand articulated by a new global women's movement, but rather reflect more a cynical attempt among elites to mask other struggles under the guise of concern for the political status of women (Krook, 2008). Further, quotas appear to contradict a number of other recent trends in international and feminist politics, namely rising neo-liberalism, a supposed decline in women's movement activity, a growing doubt about the unity of 'women' as a category, and ongoing challenges to links between the numbers of women elected and attention to women's concerns in public policy.

These tensions have led scholars and activists to outline four possibilities in terms of what quotas might mean within larger political processes, and thus for women as a group. The first is that quotas contribute, within a global context of growing neoliberalism, to an increasing separation between political empowerment, on the one hand, and social and economic empowerment, on the other (Phillips, 1999). In this scenario, the global move towards deregulation of social and economic processes has, ironically, been accompanied by increased regulation of political processes. This has led to a parting in theory and practice between concerns to combat inequalities in the social and economic sphere and concerns to promote equality in the political sphere. From this perspective, quotas appear to be a major concession to the women's movement demands, but in fact serve two decidedly non-feminist ends: to demobilize feminists through the guise of empty promises, and to mask enduring – and, some might argue, more pressing – inequalities among women themselves, particularly along class and racial lines.

The evidence for these claims is mixed. Although neo-liberalism is often associated with the end of special measures to help under-represented groups, concerns to



improve economic efficiency have in fact bolstered the case for quotas. Indeed, international actors like the United Nations often explain their support for these measures on the grounds that the increased representation of women contributes to greater gains in social and economic development (Krook, 2009). In practice, therefore, quotas and neo-liberalism are not mutually exclusive, but instead often partners in the pursuit of a new world order. Similarly, the passage of quota policies has varied effects on the women's movements: while in some countries quotas result in a decline in the women's movement activity (Gaspard, 2001), in others they spur continued mobilization to ensure that quotas are implemented in line with the spirit of the reform (Jones, 2004). As a consequence, gender quotas may undermine the feminist cause, but also may lend renewed energy to feminist organizing.

A second possibility, often raised by feminist critics of quotas, is that these policies result in the election of more women, but only those who will reinforce rather than challenge the status quo. This argument aims to expose why quota policies, which appear to be a radical departure from politics as usual, are often adopted relatively quickly by party leaders and nearly unanimously by national parliaments. To support this claim, most point to the rules for implementing these provisions, which often place considerable autonomy in the hands of party leaders and/or confer extensive discretion to electoral authorities (Htun, 2002). While some parties ignore the requirements imposed by legislation by claiming that they cannot find a sufficient number of qualified female candidates (Murray, 2004), others simply use this opportunity to select a slate of female candidates who are decidedly non-feminist (Abou-Zeid, 2006). Still, others challenge these policies in various kinds of courts, which occasionally overturn quotas on the grounds that they violate basic principles of equality and representation when principles of positive action are not guaranteed by the constitution, or merely refuse to intervene to ensure proper quota implementation.

Although some studies suggest that women elected through quotas are more loyal to party leaders than women who win open seats (Cowley & Childs, 2003), the presence of quotas does not always preclude the ability of women to represent women's concerns. Indeed, in some cases these policies confer a special mandate on women who are elected this way, precisely because their election is intended specifically to improve the representation of women as a group (Schwartz, 2004). Further, while many elites and some male aspirants do seek to subvert the impact of quota provisions through legal or constitutional challenges, some of these efforts (such as misreading of the electoral provisions, instances of electoral fraud, or the threat of court cases) in fact reinvigorate quota campaigns. In a growing number of cases, these renewed efforts lead to new specifications of the quota provisions (Krook, 2009), which can result in dramatic changes in the numbers and types of women elected.

A third expectation is that quotas serve to reify 'women' as a political category. While this creates the false impression of a unified group that does not in fact exist (Mansbridge, 2005), it also restricts the scope of women as political actors, as well as the recognition of the diverse needs of women as a group, by anticipating that women can only represent 'women's issues'. In some cases, these suspicions seem to be borne out: both anecdotal and hard evidence suggest that female candidates are often viewed, or at least perceive themselves to be viewed, as representatives of women, rather than



as representatives of other groups (Childs & Krook, 2006). By contrast, male candidates are rarely seen as advocates only of men – indeed, they are rarely considered as such – but instead as representatives of a host of other social and economic identities.

All the same, quotas vary importantly in the degree to which they essentialize women: some measures are sex-specific, indicating that women are the group that requires special treatment, while others are gender-neutral, providing for a minimum representation of both women and men. In addition, the proportion provided for ranges enormously across quota policies, from as little as one percent to as much as fifty percent, establishing different opportunities for the election of a diverse group of legislators. As a result, some quota policies may create wider or narrower definitions of 'women', opening up or restricting the capacity for those elected through quotas to pursue a broad range of policies that might benefit women as a group.

A fourth concern with regard to gender quotas is that they reduce women's effectiveness as political actors. According to this account, these effects are felt both individually and collectively. On the one hand, women elected both with and without the quota face the possibility of being taken for 'quota women', as people who did not earn political office 'on their own', thus reducing their esteem in the eyes of voters and their colleagues (Goetz & Hassim, 2003). On the other hand, these perceptions lead – either implicitly or explicitly – to a reduced scope for action, causing many quota and non-quota women to disavow their association with what are considered to be a 'narrow' set of female concerns (Childs, 2004).

Some evidence does indeed support this claim: some women do report a sense of decreased efficacy as a consequence of gender quotas. However, many more gain increased confidence over the course of their tenure and bring a range of womencentered issues to political attention. In numerous cases, this influences the political engagement of female constituents, who not only contact their representatives with greater frequency (Childs, 2004; Kudva, 2003) but who also increasingly consider running for political office themselves (Goetz & Hassim, 2003). These patterns suggest that quotas do sometimes negatively affect women's abilities as political actors, but also often generate a host of positive externalities both for individual women and for women as a group.

Conclusions on Gender Quotas

Gender quotas constitute a growing global phenomenon: more than one hundred countries have witnessed the adoption of quotas, and nearly twenty more are currently considering quota reform. While all quotas share the same basic objective of increasing women's political representation, these measures are diverse, appearing as reserved seats, party quotas, and legislative quotas, and mandating that women form between one and fifty percent of all candidates. Further, while the overwhelming majority of quota policies have been adopted during the last fifteen years, the specific actors involved in quota debates vary greatly, spanning groups at the civil society, state, and international and transnational levels. Despite their apparently radical challenge to politics-as-usual, patterns of adoption indicate that quotas can reach the political agenda for both principled and pragmatic reasons: Actors may be concerned about empowering women as a group, but may also recognize that quota adoption can serve



other political ends like appealing to female voters and thereby increasing a party's electoral chances.

Moreover, gender quotas can serve both feminist and non-feminist ends. A closer look at the effects of quotas on the election and empowerment of women suggests that particular measures may in fact 'mean' different things within distinct political contexts. Despite their enthusiasm for increased female political representation, many feminists express doubt about the intentions of quota reform. They observe that quotas rarely achieve their stated goals, and may even subvert them. Nonetheless, substantial evidence points to a range of positive implications of quota reform. These patterns suggest that gender quotas have a somewhat complicated relationship with feminist projects of empowerment: while gender quotas can reach the political agenda – at either the party or the national levels – for a variety of reasons, and can serve a number of distinct ends, they often renew feminist engagement with the formal political sphere, with crucial and positive consequences for women as a group.

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