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Improving women's representation in politics through gender quotas

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Gender quotas for women in local government bodies can improve women's representation in politics, increase provision of public services, and improve perceptions of women as leaders.

Posters for female political candidates in India. Photo: AjayTvm | Shutterstock.com

Summary

Gender quotas are one policy tool designed to increase women's representation in politics. Women hold fewer than 25 percent, of parliamentary seats worldwide, and just 12 percent, of the world's heads of state and government are women. In many countries this imbalance extends to local governments. Countries are taking action: In 2013, 118 countries were implementing a form of gender quotas for an elected office.

One way to implement gender quotas is by reserving a certain number of leadership positions for women. A review of eleven randomized evaluations in Afghanistan, Lesotho, and across 24 states in India found that reservation quotas influenced women's political participation and policy outcomes and increased the provision of public goods aligned with female voters' preferences. Further, quotas improved men's perceptions of women as leaders, increased the aspirations of girls, and helped women get elected even after quotas were removed. Most of the rigorous research drawn on in this insight comes from India; comparative conclusions should be drawn cautiously.

This evidence largely suggests that governments seeking to improve women's representation in politics should consider reservation quotas for local leadership positions.

Supporting evidence

Women leaders invested more in policies and programs women care about. Quotas are important because women may have different preferences about public goods than men. Communities in India with gender quotas for local village leaders had more public goods overall, than communities without quotas, and female leaders invested more than male leaders in public goods linked to women's concerns [1], [2], [3], . Female leaders' policy preferences not only differed from men, but also differed from one another based on geographic location and caste background [2], [4], [5].

Women leaders' investments led to improved human development outcomes and women's entrepreneurship. Quotas in India led to heightened police responsiveness to crimes against women, improvements in children's nutrition and educational outcomes, and increased women's entrepreneurship [6], [7], [8], [9], . Also in India, both men and women in communities with quotas were more willing to contribute money to public good provision [10], . In Lesotho, both men and women believed that female leaders elected under quotas performed just as well, and in some cases significantly better, than their counterparts in communities without quotas [11].

But these gains were not always clearly perceived. Although public goods provision increased in India and female leaders performed well in Lesotho, citizens in both India and Lesotho were less likely to be satisfied with female leaders compared to male leaders [1], [12], [3], [10], [11], . The satisfaction gap in India improved after subsequent elections, highlighting the importance of sustained exposure to female leaders [12], [13].

Elected women made independent choices. One risk of gender quotas is that reserving political seats for women may not effect genuine change. For example, husbands of elected female leaders may maintain power by controlling the actions of their wives. In India, women elected under quotas were more likely than their male counterparts to state that their spouses encouraged them to stand for election, and helped them do their jobs [3], . However, differences in public goods provision and policy preferences between female and male leaders demonstrate that women were able to make their own governing decisions [3].

In some cases, having a female leader meant women participated more in community governance. In Afghanistan, gender quotas in village development councils led to increased women's participation in village governance, community life, and economic activities [4], . In Indian communities with quotas, women were more likely to speak in community meetings [3], [10].

In Lesotho, although women in quota communities reported being less interested in politics than women in non-quota communities, they had similar levels of participation in community meetings. However, women in quota communities were less likely to believe that their leader wanted to listen to constituents than women in non-quota communities. It is not clear whether this effect was driven by the leader's gender or by the compulsory nature of the quota itself [11].

After quotas were removed, women continued to be elected to office. In Mumbai, female candidates for city council were five times more likely to be elected in districts that had been reserved for women in the previous election but were not currently reserved [14], . The duration of quotas seems to matter. In communities in the Indian state of West Bengal that had quotas for two election cycles, voters were more likely to elect women in the third, non-quota election cycle than in communities that never had quotas [12].

Whether quotas have a meaningful impact in increasing women's representation may depend on the design of the quota system. Some findings from non-randomized studies of gender quota policies for political party candidates in Spain and France show mixed results.

In Spain, parties were able to manipulate quotas and reduce women's political representation, in part by nominating women to stand for positions to which they are not likely to be elected [15], . In France, a quota policy that included a loophole allowing

political parties to pay penalty fees to circumvent the policy led to no changes in women's political representation, likely because the (largely male) legislators who passed the law knew that demand for female leaders was relatively low and parties were willing to pay the penalty fees [16]. There is no evidence from randomized evaluations that points to these effects; more rigorous research in this area is needed.

Exposure to female politicians changed some attitudes about women as leaders. In India, , men in communities with gender quotas were more likely to associate women with leadership and more likely to consider female leaders to be effective. These impacts were stronger after two election cycles and lasted even after women left office [12], . In Afghanistan, when quotas were applied in a short-term development program, there were no broader changes in attitudes toward the general role of women in society, possibly because the quotas were applied in a narrowly defined program. However, these quotas increased support for women's participation in community decision-making [4].

Gender quotas for village leaders in India also increased adolescent girls' educational attainment and career aspirations, , and parents' aspirations for their girls, suggesting that female leaders had positive impacts as role models in their communities [8].

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