



Promoting Women's Political Representation Overseas

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Women make up over half of the world's population – but they hold only about one-fifth of the seats in national legislatures across the globe. American foreign policies are pushing to increase this important form of women's representation, using tactics ranging from training programs for female politicians to constitutional assistance and subtle diplomatic pressures. Efforts have stepped up sharply over the past three decades. Back in the 1980s, my research suggests, U.S.-funded efforts to promote democracy around the world paid almost no attention to women's political engagement. In contrast, today, about ten percent of all such projects deal with women's rights and political representation.

Why are U.S. officials spending millions of dollars each year to increase the female presence in the world's legislatures? We can't say that it is because the United States leads the world by example. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the United States is tied with Morocco as just the eighty-second "best" country in the world in terms of women's representation. Regardless of the work still to be done at home, U.S. leaders are pushing women's cause abroad because they think it is both the right thing to do and the smart thing to do. The degree of gender equity in a country has been linked to economic development and democratization. In addition, aid supporting women in politics is something even foreign dictators are willing to tolerate. This strategy is therefore appealing not only for U.S. diplomats, but also for non-governmental organizations with U.S. funding that are trying to gain a foothold in closed societies.

Progress toward equal participation and greater political leverage for women can, however, be tricky. Increasing women's numbers in national legislatures around the world is a goal that has been pursued especially through legally-enforced gender quotas. But scholarly research shows that such quotas can be a mixed bag. There are upsides and downsides, and American foreign policymakers would be well advised to look for additional tools in certain circumstances.

What Gender Quotas are Supposed to Do

"Gender quota" laws designed to increase women's political representation come in various forms. Gender quota laws can reserve a special set of seats in the legislature for women, so that only women can run for election to those seats. Quotas can also require a certain number of women to be on the lists of candidates that go to voters, leaving voters to make the final choices.

As with any kind of affirmative action, critics of gender quotas have raised various concerns about their fairness and efficacy. But despite ongoing controversies and questions, quotas are increasing in number – and have now spread to every region of the world. In fact, quotas influence national parliamentary elections in more than half of the world's countries, according to data compiled by the Quota Project, an initiative of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, which promotes democratic practices around the world.

The Good News about Quotas

Research shows that quotas can improve women's representation in politics – both by reliably increasing the number of females elected to office and by changing the substance of policy-making.

- Looking across a wide swathe of countries and years, researchers have shown that adopting a quota is a key determinant of the number of women in a country's legislature – topping other important factors such as a country's religious heritage, democratic traditions, level of economic development, and even the proportion of girls enrolled in secondary schools.

- In India, local council seats are reserved for women through random selection. That kind of quota permits very rigorous studies of the impact of quotas. Well-designed studies have found that, even after quotas are withdrawn, their prior existence boosts the likelihood of women being elected. Quotas can also reduce negative stereotypes about women. Indeed, the presence of female officeholders can really matter. Research shows that councils with quotas adopt different types of policies than councils without them.

Where Quotas Fall Short

Yet gender quotas are hardly a panacea. In the developing world, the adoption of quotas in various countries does not correlate with the overall level of democracy. Nor are quotas related to other important indicators of higher socio-political standing for women. Countries with gender quotas now include Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, and Jordan, none of which is a paragon of freedom or gender equality.

How do gender quotas get adopted in such countries? My research finds that international pressures and encouragement are key. In fact, nations that lack other democratic credentials often seek to signal their commitment to democracy to the international community by adopting gender quotas. They hope that having more women in office will help them attract generous foreign aid or enhance their country's overall reputation and international legitimacy. If many countries use quotas for symbolic purposes, simply to mimic democracy rather than practice it, we should wonder whether quotas in and of themselves can reliably enhance women's participation in non-democratic settings.

Looking to the Future

Gender quotas for legislatures produce a tangible female presence, and they may meaningfully boost women's involvement in politics. But in countries that are fundamentally not democratic in other ways, the sheer number of female legislators may not tell us as much as we imagine about the country's progress.

American policymakers determined to promote democracy abroad, especially in closed societies, may do better by redoubling other kinds of efforts. Promoting the development of political parties and free and fair elections may be even more important than getting a few token female insiders seated in legislatures. Overall democratization through freedom to organize and speak and compete for office may be the best way to ensure that the voices of regular women are really being heard in their countries' governments.

Read more in Sarah Bush, "International Politics and the Spread of Quotas for Women's Representation in Legislatures," *International Organization* 65 (Winter 2011): 103-137.