

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER AND POLITICS

Gender Quotas and Comparative Politics

***Gender Quotas and Comparative Politics:
Past, Present, and Future Research Agendas***

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The use of electoral gender quotas — both nationally-mandated and party-based — has generated a large and growing body of research examining these policies. The rapid development of this literature stems from the widespread nature of this phenomenon, with quotas being adopted in more than half of all countries worldwide — nearly all within the last 20 years. The “first generation” of quota research focused primarily on mapping the contours of these measures, theorizing elements of quota design, paths to quota adoption, and reasons for variations in quota effects on the numbers of women elected. While such studies continue to remain important, scholars increasingly recognize that quotas are not simply about increasing the number of women in politics. This has led to the emergence of a “second generation” of quota research, examining their impact on legislative diversity, policy-making behavior, public opinion, and mass mobilization. In contrast, non-gender scholars have generally been slow to respond to these developments, despite the potential for quotas to shape a variety of political dynamics — and thus to illuminate trends in relation to many key debates in comparative politics.

Motivated by calls to develop a “comparative politics of gender,” this symposium seeks to take the first steps toward overcoming this divide by exploring what research on quotas might contribute in more explicit terms to the study of comparative politics. Another recent symposium observes that the findings of gender scholars have not been fully

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incorporated into the subfield due in part to a tendency among feminists to frame their work in relation to debates on gender and a corresponding perception among many comparativists that such research is not relevant to “mainstream” debates (Caraway 2010; Schwindt-Bayer 2010).¹ There are, however, clear benefits to engagement: A gender lens can alter the questions that are asked, how concepts are defined, and which actors are viewed as central, thus opening up a wider array of research topics and perspectives (Tripp 2006; cf. Krook 2011). To facilitate such a conversation, this essay reviews the key insights of quota studies to build a case for what these literatures bring to the study of comparative politics and identifies questions for future research.

First-generation studies document and analyze the design, origins, and numerical effects of gender quotas, both in single cases and in comparative perspective. Central contributions of this work have been classifying types of quotas and establishing where they exist; mapping the processes leading to quota introduction, often focusing on the language of these debates; and unraveling the dynamics shaping how quotas are translated into practice, highlighting the institutional and human factors affecting their prospects for success (Bauer and Britton 2006; Dahlerup 2006; Krook 2009; Tremblay 2008). Much of this work is pitched in relation to research on candidate selection, seeking to theorize how quotas interrupt existing selection dynamics (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2011; Krook 2009). Other studies, however, address quotas as electoral reforms (Celis, Krook, and Meier 2011), and a growing number frame them in terms of international norms or policy diffusion (Bush 2011; Krook and True 2012; Towns 2010).

To some extent, the presence of quotas addressed in this literature has been taken up by non-gender scholars interested in questions of candidate selection (Hazan and Rahat 2010) and electoral performance (Bhavnani 2009; Frechette, Maniquet, and Morelli 2008). Yet this first-generation research suggests that quotas have the potential to affect a broader array of political processes as well, such that more explicitly incorporating them into the analysis can help shed light on core topics like internal party democracy, the conduct and outcomes of elections, and motivations for policy change. Further, as more countries witness the adoption of quotas, the existence of such measures will need to be acknowledged — even if their impact and importance remain an empirical question.

1. See Symposium on “A Comparative Politics of Gender,” *Perspectives on Politics* 8 (1): 159–240.

Second-generation quota research calls on scholars to consider the impact of quotas “beyond numbers,” recognizing that quota campaigns often invoke a host of expectations — both positive and negative — regarding projected effects on politics and society more generally. To date, studies of these effects have been couched in the language of representation, with scholars examining the backgrounds of women elected through quota policies (descriptive representation), the priorities and actions of these women in relation to women’s issues (substantive representation), and the political attitudes and levels of engagement of citizens following quota adoption (symbolic representation) (Franceschet, Krook, and Piscopo 2012). This focus extends a long tradition of research on gender and political representation but is also logical in the sense that labeling these effects as forms of representation helps to connect them — and opens up the possibility of exploring the interrelated nature of these phenomena.

Each of these dimensions, however, could also be positioned in relation to other bodies of research that are of great interest to “mainstream” comparativists. Analyzing the qualifications of quota women versus their non-quota counterparts (Murray 2010; O’Brien 2012) could be framed in relation to work on political careers. The policy activities of women elected via quotas (Childs 2004; Franceschet and Piscopo 2008) could provide valuable insights for theories of legislative behavior and policy-making processes. Similarly, the evolving views of citizens and elites toward women in politics as a result of quotas (Beaman et al. 2009; Meier 2008) could inform the field of public opinion, just as women’s greater propensity to participate in politics following quota adoption (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2010) could shape how scholars theorize the motivations behind citizens’ political mobilization.

Gender quotas remain a flourishing area of research in political science — and increasingly in the fields of economics, anthropology, and management (Beaman et al. 2009; Burnet 2011; Chen 2010; De Paola, Scoppa, and Lombardo 2010; Tienari et al. 2009). At an empirical level, quotas will be more and more difficult to ignore as both gender and non-gender scholars seek to study and understand a wide range of political phenomena. For quota researchers in particular, however, an important task moving ahead will be to “think big” about why quotas might matter for politics more broadly and, in turn, how their presence and effects might substantiate, extend, or

challenge existing frameworks of comparative politics. The key to the project of “mainstreaming” quota research will be to consider more explicitly what quotas are a “case of” (cf. Ragin and Becker 1992), exploring many different ways in which quotas may influence, interrupt, or shed new light on the dynamics of political life.

In line with this goal, the next three essays in this section address how the study of gender quotas might reorient the analysis of central topics in the study of comparative politics. Rainbow Murray argues that the introduction of quotas problematizes in many ways how scholars have traditionally thought about citizenship and representative democracy. Susan Franceschet and Jennifer M. Piscopo contend that quotas have been instrumental in reformulating democratic principles of equality and extending them to other social, economic, and political spheres. Pär Zetterberg considers how quotas may affect dynamics inside political parties and the degree of party cohesion in parliament. The final essay by Denise Walsh, however, strikes a note of caution, suggesting that feminist agendas — especially commitments to social justice — are broader than those underpinning mainstream comparative research. She emphasizes the “added value” of a feminist lens, echoing the concerns of Tripp (2010) that engaging with the mainstream may come at the risk of abandoning some of the most innovative features of feminist research, which extend beyond the reach of traditional comparative politics.

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