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# Electoral quotas and political representation: Comparative perspectives

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## Abstract

Electoral quotas have emerged as one of the critical political reforms of the last two decades, affecting a wide range of representative processes. However, the evidence is not yet conclusive with regard to what quotas 'mean' more broadly, either for politics at large or for the empowerment of group members. Taking up this challenge, this special issue brings together articles that collectively expand the current research agenda to theorise and assess the wider impact of electoral quotas. A unifying theme is the use of comparative research strategies to illuminate dynamics indicating the possibilities and limits of what quotas can achieve. This introductory article reviews the existing literature and then details the research strategies and theoretical and empirical findings of the articles that follow, concluding with directions for future research and implications of this work for connecting central debates within political science.

## Keywords

Comparative politics, electoral quotas, electoral reform, ethnicity, gender, political representation

## Introduction

Electoral quotas have emerged as one of the critical political reforms of the last two decades. Policies for women are the most prevalent, having now been introduced in more than 100 countries worldwide. While many provisions are adopted by individual political parties, a significant and growing proportion involve changes to constitutions or electoral laws requiring that all parties select a certain proportion of female candidates (Dahlerup, 2006; Krook, 2009). Other identity

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groups, however, have also been the subject of quota legislation, including those based on language, religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, caste, age, expatriation, profession, domicile and ability (Krook and O'Brien, 2010). Measures for these groups, now in force in nearly 40 countries, typically set aside seats that only group members are eligible to contest (Htun, 2004; Krook and O'Brien, 2010; Reynolds, 2011).

The recent and global nature of these developments has sparked both scholarly and popular interest in the design, origins and effects of electoral quotas (Dahlerup, 2006; Krook, 2009; Reynolds, 2011). Yet, as an emerging literature has begun to point out, debates over quotas are not simply about increasing the numbers of women and minorities elected. Both supporters and opponents suggest that quotas will affect – positively or negatively – the quality of elected officials, opportunities to promote group interests in policymaking, societal views towards the group as political actors and the political participation of group members (Franceschet et al., 2012). These competing predictions suggest that electoral quotas may have implications for a wide variety of representative processes, but the available evidence is not yet conclusive in terms of what quotas 'mean' more broadly, especially whether they contribute in any way to the empowerment of group members.

Taking up this challenge, this special issue brings together contributions analysing a variety of empirical cases and using a range of different research methods, with the goal of collectively expanding current research agendas to theorise, study and assess the wider impact of electoral quotas. A unifying theme across the articles is the use of comparative research strategies – whether within- or cross-case comparisons – to illuminate dynamics that have not yet been the subject of extensive investigation, but indicate the possibilities and limits of what quotas alone can achieve. In so doing, the pieces highlight the intended and unintended effects of quota policies, including the role of both formal and informal rules in shaping quota impact. To place these studies in context, this introductory article begins with an overview of existing work on electoral quotas and calls for more comparative work as a means to more fully explore their effects. The article then presents an overview of the articles in the special issue, detailing their research strategies and theoretical and empirical findings. Inspired by these contributions, the final part of the article outlines directions for future research and implications of quota studies for forging new research agendas that speak to and connect a number of central debates within political science.

## **Electoral quotas and comparative research**

The diffusion of electoral quotas – both nationally mandated and party-based – has generated a large and growing literature. The vast majority of studies focus on quotas for women, addressing issues of quota design, adoption and numerical impact. Most often involving single country studies, this work has grown increasingly comparative as scholars have come to recognise the global nature of this trend and sought to situate their findings in relation to work on other cases. Taken as a whole, the literature offers several overlapping typologies of quota policies, as well as drawing attention to multiple routes to quota adoption and the factors influencing quota success (Krook, 2009). In-depth case studies have been crucial for highlighting that gender quotas may be pursued for both feminist and non-feminist reasons – stemming from women's mobilisation inside and outside political parties (Kittilson, 2006), the strategic incentives of political elites (Meier, 2004), party- and country-specific norms of equality and representation (Inheteven, 1999), and pressures from international organisations and transnational networks (Krook, 2006) – which raises questions about the possible intentions behind quota introduction and thus what they might mean for women as a group. The mixed impact of quotas on the numbers of women

elected has also generated comparative insights, emphasising quota type (Tripp and Kang, 2008), the details of individual measures (Schwindt-Bayer, 2009), the 'fit' between quotas and other political institutions (Tremblay, 2008), and political will in favour or against quota policies (Jones, 2004).

As more countries adopt electoral gender quotas, these 'first-generation' studies remain important. Recognising that quotas are not simply about increasing the numbers of women in politics, however, a 'second generation' of work has emerged, examining their impact on legislative diversity, policymaking behaviour, public opinion and mass mobilisation (Krook and Messing-Mathie, 2013). Second-generation quota research calls on scholars to consider the impact of quotas 'beyond numbers', observing that quota campaigns often invoke a host of expectations – both positive and negative – regarding their projected effects on politics and society. To date, studies have been couched in the language of political representation, examining the backgrounds of women elected through quotas (descriptive representation), the priorities and actions of quota women in relation to women's issues (substantive representation), and political attitudes and levels of engagement of citizens following quota adoption (symbolic representation) (Franceschet et al., 2012; Zetterberg, 2009). As most of this research focuses on single countries, however, it is not clear whether the initial insights of this literature can be generalised – and under what conditions gender quotas may have different types of effects.

The literature on quotas for minority groups, in contrast, is much less extensive (see also Bird, this issue). Existing research, however, addresses many of the same questions as work on gender quotas – albeit, again, primarily through the lens of a single case. 'Who' is recognised as a minority depends closely on the political context. In some countries, policies target groups based on race (Van Cott, 2005), nationality (Alionescu, 2004), religion (Salloukh, 2006), language (O'Neill, 1998), caste (Galanter, 1984), age (Darhour and Dahlerup, 2013) and ability (Powley, 2005). Almost always taking the form of reserved seats (Htun, 2004), these measures establish a minimum level of group representation, making them stronger guarantees than most gender quotas. The main distinction among them is that they tend to have one of two goals. The first is 'protection', involving the allocation of seats to groups constituting a relatively small contingent within the population, including indigenous peoples, members of minority religions and nationalities, and caste-based groups. The aim is most often to compensate for past oppression. The second goal is 'power-sharing', which entails distributing most or all seats in a legislature among different factions, defined by ethnicity, religion or language. In these cases, the goal is to ensure democratic stability in a divided society (Krook and O'Brien, 2010).

Although not explicitly couched in terms of research on electoral quotas, studies on 'majority-minority' districts in the US offer a parallel to 'second-generation' gender quota research. Rarely viewed in relation to the literature on group-based quotas (but see Moser and Holmsten, 2009), this work explores the impact of electoral district demarcation initiatives to ensure that the majority of voters are African-American or Latino, indirectly guaranteeing that a member of these groups will be elected from these districts to the US House of Representatives. Although there has been some interest in descriptive effects, assessing whether minority legislators are more similar demographically to minority constituents or to majority office-holders (Tate, 2003), most of this work addresses the substantive and symbolic impact of redistricting, seeking to establish whether the presence of minority legislators leads to greater attention to the policy interests of minority citizens (Cameron et al., 1996; Lublin, 1997; Minta, 2011) and to decreased levels of political alienation among group members (Banducci et al., 2004; Gay, 2002; Pantoja and Segura, 2003).

Despite similarities among research agendas, however, relatively little empirical research has focused on mechanisms promoting the political representation of women and minorities together (but see Htun and Ossa, 2013; Hughes, 2011; Moser and Holmsten, 2009). Within each literature,

moreover, there has been a tendency to derive arguments and conclusions based on evidence from single countries. Efforts to compare cases and findings, however, as noted earlier, reveal substantial diversity in the design, origins and impact – numeric and otherwise – of group representation schemes. These patterns indicate that more comparative work is required to gain greater insight into what electoral quotas mean for the groups that they are intended to benefit – and for politics and society more generally. These comparative strategies need not be reduced to a trade-off between quantitative statistical analyses, incorporating many countries to generate insights into broad empirical patterns, and qualitative case studies, examining a few countries to gain more information about deeper causal processes (Mahoney and Goertz, 2006).

Other approaches include: (1) opening up the definition of a ‘case’ to include sub-country units and events, on the grounds that doing so increases the sample size and thus improves the potential for making valid causal inferences (George and Bennett, 2005); and (2) connecting the intensive study of a single unit to patterns generated from investigation of other similar units, to better determine what it is a ‘case of’ (Ragin and Becker, 1992). In other words, ‘country’ may – but need not – be the unit of analysis. In this vein, the contributions that follow in this special issue pursue a wide variety of comparative research strategies, comparing states but also groups, political parties, electoral systems and spheres of application. Thinking creatively about ‘comparison’, these methodological solutions present an opportunity to generate more data, test new theories and, in the process, explore in a deeper sense what quotas can and cannot do in terms of promoting change and transformation via the vehicle of political representation.

## **Electoral quotas and political representation**

The articles in this special issue address overlapping sets of questions, related to: the dynamics of representation flowing from different modes of quota design; the tensions and differences among the provisions for different groups, including their impact on citizens who are members of both groups; the impact of electoral quotas on the dynamics inside political parties; the role of formal and informal institutions in shaping the application and outcomes of quota policies; and the spillover of quota demands to spheres where they do not initially or formally apply. Together, the authors offer fresh insights into the direct effects of quotas, in terms of who is nominated and elected to political assemblies, as well as their indirect impact, with respect to broader transformations of inequalities in power. A key lesson is that while quotas do not always have the effects anticipated by their advocates and opponents, they can have both positive and negative unintended consequences, as made apparent through strategies of comparative analysis.

Beginning with a more traditional approach to comparative research, Karen Bird rightly observes that group representation schemes for ethnic groups have rarely been subject to multi-country study – but in fact demonstrate remarkable diversity, despite often being lumped together as ‘reserved seats’ (cf. Htun, 2004; Krook and O’Brien, 2010). She develops a framework to conceptualise and classify these different schemes globally and theorises variations in representational dynamics that result from various configurations of electoral institutions, structures of ethnic diversity and boundaries of group definition imposed by the special rules. Bird identifies three broad ‘families’ of ethnic group representation – those guaranteeing seats to ethnic parties, those incorporating designated groups within larger pan-ethnic parties and those creating special electoral districts for ethnic interests – and finds that the third offers the best potential for multiple channels of participation, as well as responsiveness to group needs.

Examining ethnic quotas in Singapore, Netina Tan employs a different comparative strategy to explore how quotas for one group shape the representation of other groups. She finds that despite a tendency in the literature to expect that provisions for ethnic groups may undermine

opportunities for women to be elected (Holmsten et al., 2010; Hughes, 2011), the ethnic quota has in fact generated growth in women's political representation in Singapore over time. Tan argues that the need to implement the ethnic quota led to an increase in district magnitude, enhancing party gatekeepers' willingness to place women in electable slots in multi-member constituencies – providing a mechanism as to why proportional representation electoral systems may benefit women's chances of being elected, even if gender quotas are not present (Tremblay, 2008). The cross-group comparison thus highlights an unexpected outcome of quota legislation on broader trends in legislator diversity, even when only one group receives guarantees.

Karen Celis, Silvia Erzeel, Liza Mügge and Alyt Damstra pick up on this theme, but approach it from the opposite direction. They note that, as in most of Western Europe, concerns to include women preceded calls to incorporate minority ethnic groups as political candidates in Belgium (more specifically, Flanders) and the Netherlands. Applying an intersectional perspective, Celis et al. explore the degree to which gender quotas influence who is elected among minority ethnic Members of Parliament. Engaging in a dual comparison, they compare the election of minority women, minority men, majority women and majority men in two countries that are otherwise very similar – apart from the use of legal quotas in Flanders and party quotas and targets in the Netherlands. The authors find that, contrary to their expectations, minority ethnic women – despite being located at the intersection of two marginalised positions – are in fact advantaged for three reasons: they satisfy voter demands for women and minority ethnic groups with a single candidate; they suffer less from negative stereotypes than minority ethnic men; and they are perceived as less threatening to the internal balance of power within parties.

The next two articles delve further into these questions, focusing on how quotas shape and are shaped by struggles for power within political parties. Focusing on rules governing candidate selection processes, Marion Reiser maps the broader universe of representational measures utilised in Germany, comparing groups, parties and formal versus informal rules. She discovers that a wide variety of groups are subject to some type of guarantee – incumbents, newcomers, youth, women, regions, factions and interest groups – although specific groups vary to some degree across parties. Further, when electoral lists are composed, there can be tensions and trade-offs between rules, with those that are formalised gaining precedence over those that are viewed as more informal. The findings suggest that electoral quotas for various groups are rarely implemented in a vacuum; rather, they are commonly part of a broader 'web' of party rules affecting candidate selection decisions.

Adopting a similar multi-party research design and taking a feminist institutionalist approach, Tània Verge and María de la Fuente delve more deeply into the internal life of five political parties in Catalonia. They explore the impact of introducing gender quotas for elected office on gender equality in other aspects of party life, finding that traditional gender regimes remain firmly intact without exception across parties, despite substantial differences in their political ideologies. Although women have experienced substantial breakthroughs as candidates in Spanish elections, focus groups with party women point to four types of informal practices contributing to continued male dominance inside the parties: gendered rituals in the everyday operation of party bodies; sexist organisational practices; informal networks; and uses of time. Group interviews suggest, indeed, that these informal gendered institutions are maintained as a way to avoid giving women more political power, even when new formal institutions like gender quotas are introduced – thereby masking the more limited degree to which women are in fact politically empowered.

Taking a more optimistic stance, Ki-Young Shin also investigates the indirect effects of gender quotas, in her case, by comparing women's prospects in the two parts of the electoral system governed by different types of quota legislation in South Korea. While the proportional representation (PR) portion of the electoral system is subject to a mandatory 50% quota, implemented diligently

by the political parties, the much larger single-member district (SMD) component entails a much softer 30% recommendation, which is largely ignored. Shin observes that – due to a ‘no re-election’ norm in PR elections – women are prevented from running again for PR seats. However, women having held such seats has the longer-term effect of creating a body of experienced female incumbents who can then be recruited as SMD candidates, as new groups of women are selected to fill PR slots. Via this dynamic, Shin argues, quotas in South Korea contribute to ‘sustainable representation’ (Darhour and Dahlerup, 2013) by giving women opportunities to initiate and develop political careers (cf. Bhavnani, 2009).

Cecilia Josefsson similarly tackles the role of electoral systems, albeit from an angle not yet seen in the literature on gender quotas. More specifically, using a comparison over time, she considers whether a change in the system for electing women to reserved seats in Uganda – moving from an electoral college consisting of mostly male village elders to direct elections by male and female citizens – has affected the profiles of the women elected through quotas. Expecting that voters would choose women who more closely resembled women in the population at large, and who were also less loyal to the one-party dominant regime, Josefsson finds instead that the women elected to parliament before and after the reform are similar in most respects – the main difference being that those subject to universal suffrage often had higher levels of education and were less likely to report an interest in representing women’s issues than those who had been indirectly elected. She suggests that this may be the result of needing to campaign in large districts and appeal to both men and women for electoral support.

Picking up on the theme of ‘spillover’, the final article by Petra Meier explores a further measure of quota impact, namely, the diffusion of gender quotas across different spheres of social, political and economic life. This question is of particular salience in Europe, where – after years of experience with quotas for women in politics – laws have been proposed and/or adopted in many countries to require the inclusion of women on corporate boards (Teigen, 2012). Examining developments in Belgium, Meier compares the design and debates leading to the adoption of five quota laws between 1990 and 2011 for federal advisory boards, electoral lists of candidates and boards of listed and state-owned companies. In general, she finds remarkable similarities across provisions, despite their application to distinct spheres, with laws becoming stricter over time in terms of the percentage of women specified and the sanctions imposed in cases of non-compliance. These patterns indicate that political quotas do not merely exist in a vacuum, but may inspire more broad-ranging debates about gender equality in other spheres as well.

## Conclusions and directions for future research

The articles in this special issue thus advance the comparative research agenda on electoral quotas and political representation in a number of new and creative ways. Viewed together, they point to two fruitful lines for future research. The first is the importance of examining the *politics behind the presence* of under-represented groups. Research on the numerical impact of quotas is quick to recognise the importance of quota design and the broader context in which they are introduced as a means to understand why some policies are more effective than others. In contrast, attention to these factors has not yet been a central concern of work seeking to ascertain the impact of quotas beyond numbers (but see Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, 2011). Yet, there are good reasons to expect that design and context do matter – and may be crucial for uncovering the conditions under which quotas may have positive versus negative effects, thereby helping ensure that quotas attain the goals they purport to achieve.

The authors in this symposium contribute to this avenue of research in three ways. One is by adopting a broader definition of ‘quotas’, recognising not only that quotas may apply beyond the legislative

arena, but also that some groups may receive formal guarantees while others are the subject of more informal modes of inclusion. The broader landscape of measures can be crucial for shaping the degree to which quotas support, among other things, the election of a more diverse cohort of politicians and the broader social, economic and political empowerment of group members. A second thread relates to shining a light on the struggles going on inside political parties following quota adoption – asking, in particular, who implements quotas and who benefits from them. The surprising finding, for example, that minority ethnic women tend to be elected at higher rates than minority ethnic men can be explained in terms of strategies to preserve the leadership of majority ethnic men. Similarly, quotas for elected positions may mask ongoing inequalities within parties, leading the public to conclude that group members are no longer prone to problems of discrimination – when, in fact, they are.

A third angle on the role of design and context in shaping quota impact is through the lens of formal versus informal institutions. As demonstrated by various authors, groups may receive formal or informal guarantees, with the status of specific groups varying considerably across countries and parties – but also meaning that groups may be granted privileged access in candidate selection processes, even if they are not subject to formal quota requirements. These ‘webs’ of rules, however, can also conflict, with certain groups losing out to others. These interactions, further, can be structured by opportunities inherent in larger electoral institutions, whether this is the presence of a certain type of electoral system or a moment of electoral reform, both of which can mediate the effects of quota policies with regard to how group members are elected – and, indeed, who they are – with potential implications for legislative behaviour. On all these topics, more comparative work is needed to hypothesise, and ultimately make predictions about, the conditional impact of electoral quotas on a wide variety of outcomes.

The second line for future research signalled by the articles concerns definitions of ‘impact’, in particular, a need to expand traditional definitions of political representation to *recognise a broader set of ‘representative processes’* at work not only in electoral politics, but also inside political parties and in other realms of social and economic life – in turn, engaging more directly with dynamics of inequality in power. The impact of electoral quotas may thus be both direct, affecting who is nominated and elected to political office, and indirect, altering – or failing to transform – the broader distribution of capacities to influence social, economic and political outcomes. Initial research on quotas for women and minority ethnic groups indicates that their effects may be far-reaching, influencing power relations in households (Beaman et al., 2012; Burnet, 2011), even if it remains unclear as to whether they contribute to greater economic redistribution across society (Dunning and Nilekani, 2013). Awareness of the power dynamics at work is crucial not only for theorising the potential of quotas, but also for understanding the limits to what they can realistically achieve. A focus on power can also permit a more nuanced analysis of what may be construed as the intended and unintended consequences of quota reform, revealing that what appears to be unintended may in fact be the outcome of intentional design.

These themes suggest that research on electoral quotas has the ability to illuminate dynamics that ‘mainstream’ political science has neglected – as well as shedding new light on topics that are central to comparative political analysis. The latter includes, most obviously, work on candidate selection and political representation, but also research on political careers, legislative behaviour and citizen attitudes and engagement (Krook and Messing-Mathie, 2013). The articles in this special issue extend this focus further, however, proposing that studies of quotas may also be relevant for scholars interested in the functioning of electoral systems, the internal dynamics of political parties and the ability – and limits – of public policy to shape society. As a group, they indicate that – even when the empirical material is derived from a single country – creative comparative research strategies can go a long way in assessing what quotas ‘mean’ in a broader sense, but especially for their purported beneficiaries.



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Pär Zetterberg is Researcher at the Department of Government at Uppsala University, Sweden. His research interests include candidate recruitment and political representation in comparative perspective, with a particular focus on electoral gender quotas. He has published his research in such journals as *Political Research Quarterly*, *Parliamentary Affairs*, *Representation*, *Development and Change* and *Politics & Gender*.