

Using Quota's to Increase Women's Political Representation

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Given the slow speed by which the number of women in politics is growing, women everywhere are calling for more efficient methods to increase their representation. Quotas present one such mechanism. The introduction of quota systems for women represents a qualitative jump into a policy of exact goals and means. Because of its relative efficiency, the hope for dramatic increase in women's representation by using this system is strong. At the same time quotas raise serious questions and, in some cases, strong resistance. What are the arguments for and against the use of quotas? What are the best ways to implement quotas? What lessons can be learned from countries' experiences with quota systems? In the discussion that follows we hope to shed some light on this frequently debated mechanism for raising women's representation.

What are Quotas?

The core idea behind quota systems is to recruit women into political positions and to ensure that women are not only a few tokens in political life.

Quotas for women entail that women must constitute a certain number or percentage of the members of a body, whether it is a candidate list, a parliamentary assembly, a committee, or a government. The quota system places the burden of recruitment not on the individual woman, but on those who control the recruitment process. The core idea

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behind this system is to recruit women into political positions and to ensure that women are not isolated in political life. Previous notions of having reserved seats for only one or for very few women, representing a vague and all-embracing category of "woman", are no longer considered sufficient. Today, quota systems aim at ensuring that women constitute at least a "critical minority" of 30 or 40 per cent. Quotas may be applied as a

temporary measure, that is to say, until the barriers for women's entry into politics are removed.

Most quotas aim at increasing women's representation, because the problem to be addressed usually is the under-representation of women; this is particularly relevant since women constitute 50 per cent of the population in most countries. A quota regulation may, for example, require that at least 40 per cent of the members of a committee are women.

Quota systems may also be constructed as gender-neutral, which means that they aim at correcting the under-representation of both women and men. In this case, the requirement may be that men as well as women should constitute 40 per cent of the members of a committee, or that neither gender should occupy more than 60 per cent and no less than 40 per cent of the seats.

Quotas to help men into certain positions may be used in sectors with an overwhelming representation of women, for example, social work. But even in this sector, men often occupy the majority of leadership positions; thus quotas are aimed more at getting men into education and into entry-level positions in this field. There are, however, rare examples of gender-neutral quota systems that have actually helped some men into politics, for example, in the Socialist People's

Party in Denmark, a party with many active women. In this discussion we focus mainly on quotas for women.

«One cannot deal with the problem of female representation by a quota system alone. Political parties, the educational system, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), trade unions, churches all must take responsibility within their own organizations to systematically promote women's participation, from the bottom up. This will take time. It will not happen overnight, or in one year or five years; it will take one or two generations to realize significant change. This is what we are working on in Sweden. We did not start with a quota system. First we laid the groundwork to facilitate women's entry into politics. We prepared the women to ensure they were competent to enter the field; and we prepared the system, which made it a little less shameful for men to step aside. Then we used quotas as an instrument in segments and institutions where we needed a breakthrough.»

Birgitta Dahl, Speaker of Parliament, Sweden

Quotas: Pros and Cons

Various arguments have been set forth for and against the introduction of quotas as a means to increase the political presence of women. Some of the pros and cons include:

Pros

- Quotas for women do not discriminate, but compensate for actual barriers that prevent women from their fair share of the political seats.
- Quotas imply that there are several women together in a committee or assembly, thus minimizing the stress often experienced by the token women.
- Women have the right as citizens to equal representation.
- Women's experiences are needed in political life.
- Election is about representation, not educational qualifications.
- Women are just as qualified as men, but women's qualifications are downgraded and minimized in a male-dominated political system.
- It is in fact the political parties that control the nominations, not primarily the voters who decide who gets elected.
- Introducing quotas may cause conflicts, but only temporarily.

Cons

- Quotas are against the principle of equal opportunity for all, since women are given preference.
- Quotas are undemocratic, because voters should be able to decide who is elected.
- Quotas imply that politicians are elected because of their gender, not because of their qualifications and that more qualified candidates are pushed aside.
- Many women do not want to get elected just because they are women.
- Introducing quotas creates significant conflicts within the party organization.

«Quotas are a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they oblige men to think about including women in decision-making, since men must create spaces for women. On the other hand, since it is men who are opening up these spaces, they will seek out women who they will be able to manage – women who will more easily accept the hegemony of men.»

Anna Balletbo, MP Spain

Two Concepts of Equality

In general, quotas for women represent a shift from one concept of equality to another. The classic liberal notion of equality was a notion of “equal opportunity” or “competitive equality”. Removing the formal barriers, for example, giving women voting rights, was considered sufficient. The rest was up to the individual women.

Following strong feminist pressure in the last few decades, a second concept of equality is gaining increasing relevance and support: the notion of “equality of result”. The argument is that real equal opportunity does not exist just because formal barriers are removed. Direct discrimination and a complex pattern of hidden barriers prevent women from getting their share of political influence. Quotas and other forms of positive measures are thus a means towards equality of result. The argument is based on the experience that equality as a goal cannot be reached by formal equal treatment as a means. If barriers exist, it is argued, compensatory measures must be introduced as a means to reach equality of result.

The World of Quotas

Quotas for women are intended to give women more power. However, to introduce quotas against severe resistance, as was the case in Scandinavia, requires that women already have gained some power.

There are a number of different quota methods for ensuring that women are represented in parliament.¹ In the following section, we look at two of these methods in greater detail: quotas through constitution or national legislation and quotas through political parties, with a special emphasis on the Nordic case. Often, the debate focuses entirely on the introduction of quotas. In this chapter, however, we also want to highlight the process of implementing quotas. The implementation process has too often been neglected, but it is, in fact, crucial for the outcome. In the worst case scenario, quotas may be introduced after a heated debate, but then have no effect on increasing women’s representation because there are no mechanisms to ensure their implementation.

Quotas through Constitution or National Legislation

Countries where quotas for women have been written into the constitution or introduced through national legislation include the following:

In the 1995 Constitution of the Republic of **Uganda**, one parliamentary seat from each of the 39 districts is reserved for women (13 per cent), resulting in an increase in women’s political representation. Some other women have also been elected to parliament on the non-gender specific reserved seats.

- During the 1990s, 11 **Latin American countries** passed national legislation requiring a minimum level of 20 to 40 per cent women candidates in national elections. Argentina was the first country to introduce a 30 per cent quota in the region and has also been among the most successful. Sanctions for non-compliance as well as the closed-list proportional representation electoral system have contributed to a substantial increase in women’s representation.
- In **India**, the 74th amendment requires that 33 per cent of the seats in local municipal bodies are reserved for women. The Indian Women’s Movement has mobilized and educated women candidates. Quotas for women in the Lok Sabha (Lower House) have been proposed. The policy of reservation, as well as of quotas, is a well-known and much disputed, measure in Indian politics.²
- In **Nepal**, five per cent of the candidates of each political party or organization (Single-Member District) must be women according to the Constitution and the electoral law. Most women candidates, however, are placed in constituencies where they have little chance of being elected.
- Other countries to mandate some form of parliamentary representation for women include Bangladesh (30 seats out of 330 or 9 per cent), **Belgium, Italy**³ and United Republic of **Tanzania** (where 20 per cent of seats at the national level and 25 per cent of seats at the local level are reserved for women). **Eritrea** (10 seats out of 105).
- In **France**, a 1999 Constitutional Amendment established equal access by women and men to elective office where 50 per cent of candidates on list forwarded for election must be women. Political parties face financial penalization if they do not comply.⁴

What have been countries’ experiences with such forms of quota? Undoubtedly, it is easier to introduce quotas for women when other forms of quota are also formally introduced, for example, quotas based on occupational or ethnic criteria. Regional quotas which distribute the seats to various parts of the country, not just according to their share of the population, but giving non-proportional seats to certain regions over others, are in fact used in most countries.

History seems to prove that the implementation of a quota system is made easier in a new political system than in an older one, where most seats might be “occupied” and consequently a conflict may arise between the interests of new

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groups versus those of the incumbents. In general, it is less complicated to implement quotas for an appointed post than for an elected one. At elections, the quota system touches the very foundation of the democratic process and may clash with the ideal that it is up to the voters to choose the representatives they want. However, as the previous chapter on electoral systems has indicated, nominations are the crucial stage – and the power of the nominations, though influenced by the voters, rests with the political parties. Since the political parties in most countries are the real gatekeepers to political office, quotas may lead to a dispute between the central and regional/local branches of the political parties. The local branches often fight for their right to choose their own candidates without the interference of the central party organization.

“Reserved seats” is the common concept for such systems. However, there is no clear-cut distinction between a system of reserved seats and quotas, since centrally reserved seats may also involve some kind of election, as in the case of Uganda and the former European communist parliaments.

Critics of reserved seats for women have argued that this system, in fact, prevents an increase in women's representation, namely above the quota level. Does the quota system indirectly prevent a further increase in women's representation and stop the further recruitment of women, once the quota requirement is met? Today, this does not seem to constitute a real problem, at least not yet. Certainly women-quotas that only prescribe one-third or even less of the seats may hinder a further increase in women's representation. Whether this has been or will be the case depends on how the quota system is constructed.

Historical experiences illustrate this point further. During communist rule, most countries in Eastern and Central Europe implemented a quota system for women. In the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), a number of seats were reserved for representatives of the official women's organization. However, the number of women in the GDR parliament increased during the 1970s and 1980s, not because more seats were given to the women's organization, but due to an increase in the number of women within the reserved seats for the trade unions and for youth organizations. So in this specific case, the “women seats” did not prevent an increase in women's representation through other channels.

Quotas for women in the form of a minimum 40 per cent and maximum 60 per cent may, however, prevent women from reaching a representation above 60 per cent and thus from dominating the assemblies in the same way as men have done historically and still do in most parliaments in the world. Nevertheless, women's organizations have not demanded more than 50 per cent of the seats for women.

It is worthwhile noting that some governments, in some Arab countries, for example, actually use the quota system for their own purposes. By getting more of their especially chosen women on board governments can achieve two objectives: get the token “controllable” women, while claiming they are in favour of promoting women's political participation.

Quotas through Political Parties: The Nordic Case

The Scandinavian countries – Denmark, Norway and Sweden – are well-known for having a very high representation of women in politics. The Nordic countries have among the highest political representation of women in the world. This increase took place largely during the last 30 years. In 2002, women constituted over 42 per cent of the members of parliament in Sweden, 38 per cent in Denmark and 36 per cent in Norway.

No constitutional clause or law demands a high representation of women in Scandinavia. For the most part the increase can be attributed to sustained pressure on the part of women's groups within parties as well as the women's movement in general. Women mobilized and organized pressure to ensure that political parties increased their number of women candidates, that is to say, women candidates with a fair chance of winning.

This pressure was applied to all political parties in Scandinavia. Some parties responded by applying a quota system. In three Scandinavian countries, quotas were introduced based on decisions made by the political parties themselves. Quotas were introduced in the social democratic parties and in parties to the left during the 1970s and 1980s. Most centre and right wing parties, however, considered quotas “un-liberal”.

In 1983, the Norwegian Labour Party decided that “at all elections and nominations both sexes must be represented by at least 40 per cent”.

In 1988, the Danish Social Democratic Party stated, “each sex has the right to a representation of at least 40 per cent of the Social Democratic candidates for local and regional elections. If there is not a sufficient number of candidates from each sex, this right will not fully come into effect”. This rule, which also applied to internal party bodies, was abolished in 1996.

In 1994, the Swedish Social Democratic Party introduced the principle of “every second on the list a woman”. This means that if the first on the list of electoral candidates is a man, the next must be a woman, followed by a man, followed by a woman, or vice versa.

There are two important differences between the quota regulations for the Norwegian Labour Party versus the Danish Labour Party. First, in the Norwegian Labour Party quotas are in force during all elections; in the case of Denmark, they apply only to elections to the local councils and to the county councils and not for elections to the national parliament. Second, there are no exceptions to the rule in the Norwegian clause; however, the last paragraph of the Danish rule allows for an exception if a sufficient number of candidates of either sex cannot be found. This exception may endanger reaching the goal of at least 40 per cent of each sex, as it may function as an excuse for the party leadership not to try very hard to recruit more women candidates. Political parties that have quotas for elections usually also have some kind of quota system when electing the party's internal bodies and leadership.

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But rules are not enough. Whether a quota system reaches its objective depends largely on the process of implementation. If a policy of quota implementation is not decided upon, a quota requirement of, for example 30, 40 or 50 per cent, is not likely to be met. The quota must be embedded in the selection and the nomination processes from the very start. If quota requirements are only discussed at the last stages, it is usually very difficult to reach the goal.

The introduction of quotas for women faced two main problems in Scandinavian countries. First, it was sometimes difficult to find a sufficient number of women who were willing to stand for election. Second, it was problematic if a party had to dismiss a male incumbent in order to include a woman. Consequently, vacant seats were women's best chances. But to ensure that a sufficient number of vacant seats were available for national parliament may involve a conflict between the central and the local party organization.

With regard to the first problem, while it is true that there have been recruitment problems, this has not been the case at all times and has not necessarily been true for all parties. The experience of the last few decades indicates that it has not been so difficult to recruit women who were already politicians to stand for top positions. What was harder was to recruit women for positions at the first entrance level. The advantage of the quota system is that it forces the nominating bodies, especially the political parties, to engage in an active recruitment process. In so doing it also focuses their attention on the actual working conditions and culture of politics, thus encouraging the possibility of making political participation more attractive for women. But a quota system cannot remove the obstacles of combining job, family and political activity; a significant issue for women and a bigger problem for women than for men.

With regard to the second point, it is true that in most political systems the incumbent has a greater advantage than the newcomer does. The best chance of being nominated and getting elected belongs to those who already have a seat. Consequently, the smaller the rate of turnover, the more difficult it is to introduce quotas since the party will have to take away a seat from one of its own people to give it to a woman. In local elections in Denmark and Sweden, for example, two-thirds of the incumbents are usually re-elected; most of them are men. Part of the resistance to quotas, undoubtedly, comes from incumbents' fear of losing their seats.

A number of strategies can be used to prevent such conflicts with incumbents. Some ideas tried in Scandinavian countries include the following:

- When the Danish Social Democratic Party introduced a quota requiring women to occupy 40 per cent of the seats in internal bodies and committees, the size of the committees was enlarged, sometimes even doubled, to allow seats for women without having to dismiss men. In addition, two party vice chairmen were elected, one woman and one man. There was, however, only one chairman elected – a man.
- The Norwegian Labour Party did not have difficulty recruiting qualified women candidates. The national party leadership and the party's women's secretariat underlined that the objective of the quota was to have more women elected, not just to have more women on the party's list of candidates. As we noted in the previous chapter, in the Norwegian legislative electoral system voters cannot change the priority given to the candidates by the party; in other words, it is the party who decides who is elected from their list. At first, controversies occurred since the top candidates were usually men who wanted to continue in their positions. Only gradually was it possible to fill the vacant seats with women. The Norwegian experience reveals that in such an electoral system it takes about three elections to implement a quota system. Today, women constitute about 50 per cent of the parliamentary faction of the party and 50 per cent of the ministers, when the party is in power.
- Prior to the 1970 election, a local branch of the Swedish Social Democratic Party believed that women should fill the candidate lists, but it was the men who had the long years of experience which was also much needed. Consequently, the first ten names on the list remained men, with their experience, age, representation and knowledge. After the first 10 names, the party alternated with a woman; thus every second position was a woman. At the next election in 1973, the party alternated the names of men and women from number five on the list. Before the 1976 election, the local party decided that the whole list for the local council should include

approximately every second a woman and a man. Later the party simply made up two lists, one with men and one with women and combined the two lists before the election. The only problem that may arise is whose name is to go first on the list.⁵

«We have tried reserved parliamentary seats for village panchayats and from my experience, this is a very effective measure. We have reserved 33 per cent of the seats in panchayats for women. Before this policy, we did not have women prepared for leadership positions; but as a result of the policy, political parties have to search for women. We got a mixed response. Some men did not want women to come forward, so they put forward their wives, sisters-in-law and mothers. But talented, educated women also came forward. Now the old argument that there are no able women to become candidates for legislative assemblies no longer holds. Because now the women serving as mayors and as chairmen of the municipal committees will be groomed as prospective candidates for parliament. More and more women have been elected to panchayats – and this is a valuable pool of women for legislative assemblies. Thus the reservation of seats is a very effective measure, especially in countries such as India where there is such meagre representation of women in parliament...»

Sushma Swaraj, MP India

In Summary

1. The aim of quota systems is to increase considerably the political representation of women, or in the case of gender-neutral quotas, that of the under-represented gender.
2. Successful quota systems lead to:
 - The active recruitment of women by political parties in order to have a sufficient number of qualified candidates to fulfil the quota;
 - A critical mass of women, rather than a token few, who will be able to influence political norms and culture; and
 - Women having the possibility to influence the decision-making process as individuals or with specific women's or feminist points of view.
3. It is not sufficient to pass rules that ensure women 30 per cent of the seats. The next step of implementing quotas is critical. With respect to implementation, the following should be kept in mind:
 - The more vague the regulations, the higher the risk is that the quota regulations are not properly implemented – quotas for candidates do not automatically lead to the election of more women.
 - Pressure from women's organizations and other groups is necessary for the successful implementation of quotas.
 - There must be sanctions for non-compliance with the quota requirement.
4. Contrary to what many supporters of quotas believed or hoped for, conflicts over quotas for women do not seem to be temporary but something we will have to continue to contend with.

Although there is no one remedy for increasing women's presence in parliament, the discussions on quotas and electoral systems point to some of the avenues to which women can turn. Some countries have refined certain tools more than others as a result of trial and error and long years of experimentation. By making these experiences available to women around the world, we hope to provide some guidelines and directions for future trials in this field. In the next chapter, we look at the women already in parliament and discuss what they can do to enhance their effectiveness.

Endnotes

1. Ben Reilly of International IDEA contributed to this breakdown of different types of quota. See Reynolds, A. and Ben Reilly. 1997. *The International IDEA Handbook of Electoral System Design*. Stockholm: International IDEA.
2. See the case study on India for more insight into women and politics in India.
3. Inter-Parliamentary Union. 1995. *Women in Parliament 1945–1995*. Geneva: IPU.
4. Council of Europe. *Positive Action in the Field of Equality between Men and Women*. EG-S-PA (2000) No.7. p. 81.
5. Varannan damernas. Slutbetänkande från utredningen om kvinnorepresentation. [Every Second a Woman. Final Report from the Commission on Women's Representation]. SOU 1987:No. 19. p. 86.

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