

WOMEN AND PARLIAMENT

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It is generally accepted that a more equitable representation of women in parliament is required worldwide to more accurately reflect the composition of society and to ensure that women's diverse interests are taken into account.⁽¹⁾ The proportion of women in parliaments around the world is increasing every year; however, at 18%,⁽²⁾ it is still far from the 30% minimum benchmark to ensure a critical mass of women parliamentarians.⁽³⁾ With 22.1% of seats in the Canadian House of Commons currently held by women, Canada ranks 47th internationally in the representation of women in the lower house of parliament, and 10th among members of the Inter-Parliamentary Forum of the Americas (see Figure 1). The Americas have registered some impressive gains in the proportion of women in parliament over the past few years. Overall, women hold 21.5% of all seats in the region, second only to the Nordic countries (which have a regional average of 41%).⁽⁴⁾ This outcome is largely due to the adoption of quota laws in many countries in Latin America over the past decade, and electoral reform. This paper provides an overview of how quotas and electoral systems have been used to increase the proportion of women in parliaments.

Figure 1 – Percentages of Women in National Legislatures Among Inter-Parliamentary Forum of the Americas Member Countries, June 2009 (%)

Country	Lower House	Upper House
Cuba	43.2	N/A
Costa Rica	37.0	N/A
Ecuador	32.3	N/A
Guyana	30.0	N/A
Peru	27.5	N/A

- (1) United Nations, *Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration*, United Nations Department of Public Information, New York, 1995, clause 190(d), <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/decision.htm#object1> (accessed 30 January 2006).
- (2) See the website of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>, for a full listing of the representation of women in various parliaments around the world.
- (3) This benchmark is used by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the United Nations.
- (4) International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *Show Me Your Electoral Code and I'll Predict Your Gender Gap*, http://www.idea.int/americas/yes_we_have_no_women.cfm.

Country	Lower House	Upper House
Trinidad and Tobago	26.8	41.9
Suriname	25.5	29.0
Honduras	23.4	N/A
Mexico	23.2	18.0
Canada	22.1	34.0
Dominican Republic	19.7	3.1
El Salvador	19.0	N/A
Dominica	18.8	N/A
Venezuela	18.6	N/A
Nicaragua	18.5	N/A
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	18.2	N/A
Bolivia	16.9	3.7
United States	16.8	15.0
Chile	15.0	5.3
Jamaica	13.3	14.3
Grenada	13.3	30.8
Paraguay	12.5	15.6
Bahamas	12.2	60.0
Uruguay	12.1	12.9
Guatemala	12.0	–
Saint Lucia	11.1	27.3
Antigua	10.5	29.4
Barbados	10.0	19.0
Brazil	9.0	12.3
Panama	8.5	N/A
Colombia	8.4	11.8
Saint Kitts and Nevis	6.7	N/A
Haiti	4.1	11.1
Belize	0.0	38.5
Argentina ⁽⁵⁾	–	–

Source: Data obtained from the Inter-Parliamentary Union's Women in National Parliaments website. Figure prepared by Julie Cool, Parliamentary Information and Research Service, Library of Parliament.

Recent years have witnessed a surge of interest in patterns of political representation. The most common reforms, from a global perspective, have been provisions for the increased representation of women, including the implementation of quotas and electoral reform.

(5) At the time of drafting this paper, the website of the Inter-Parliamentary Union did not list the percentage of women in the National Legislature for Argentina for July 2009.

THE EFFECT OF QUOTAS AND ELECTORAL SYSTEMS ON WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION

A. Quotas⁽⁶⁾

Women are less likely than men to see themselves as potential candidates for election. As a result, “if parties adopt gender-neutral nominating rules the consequence would be a pool of candidates skewed towards men.”⁽⁷⁾ The role of political parties in promoting and supporting women to run for nominations is often identified as the most important factor in increasing the representation of women in parliament.

When more women candidates run for office, more women are elected to office. Parties that have a greater proportion of women candidates tend to have a higher proportion of women in their caucuses. This outcome raises the question of the role of political parties in nominating more women to run for Parliament. Most political parties in Canada have implemented a variety of measures to attract and support women candidates. These include special funds to help nominated women cover campaign-related costs, and minimum targets for women candidates. The New Democratic Party, which has historically attracted more women candidates than the other parties, has a policy of freezing nominations until riding associations prove that a genuine search has been made for women or other candidates from under-represented groups. Similarly, before the 2008 election, then-Liberal leader Stéphane Dion committed that “a thorough search for women candidates [would be] conducted in each un-held riding *before* a nomination meeting [would be] called.”⁽⁸⁾ This process allowed the Liberal party to exceed its minimum target of 33% female candidates in the 2008 election.⁽⁹⁾

(6) For more information about the use of quotas, consult the website of the research project *An International Comparison of the Use of Electoral Quotas to obtain Equal Political Citizenship for Women*, led by Professor Drude Dahlerup, University of Stockholm, <http://www.statsvet.su.se/quotas/>.

(7) Richard Matland, *Explaining Women's Representation: The Role of Legislative Recruitment & Electoral Systems*, paper delivered at the Expert Group Meeting on equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes, with particular emphasis on political participation and leadership, organized by the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, in collaboration with the Economic Commission for Africa and the Inter-Parliamentary Union, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 24-27 October 2005, http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/eql-men/docs/EP.4_Matland.pdf (accessed 18 January 2006).

(8) National Women's Liberal Commission, *Nominations Tracking*, http://www.nwlc-clfn.ca/tracking_e.aspx (accessed 8 October 2008).

(9) Equal Voice, “Dion's Campaign Commitments to Electing Women,” News release, Ottawa, n.d., <http://equalvoice.ca/handler.php?file=on&tag=newleader>.

The targets for presenting female candidates in Canada are voluntary. In other countries, these targets are legislated. More than one hundred countries have experimented with quotas for the selection of female candidates. The following describes the various kinds of quotas which exist:

- i. *Reserved seats* are national policies that set aside a certain number of seats in parliament for women. Such seats may be distributed in a number of different ways, although they are most often allocated by designating certain districts as ‘women’s districts’ for the period of one election cycle, or by granting political parties the right to appoint a certain number of women in accordance with the percentage of votes the party received in the most recent elections.
- ii. *Political party quotas and targets*, in contrast, are party-specific measures aimed at increasing the proportion of women among party candidates or elected representatives. Party quotas involve establishing a specific percentage, proportion, or numeric range for the selection of female candidates, although the actual wording of the reform may be gender neutral and simply establish minimum or maximum representation of either sex. Party targets are closely related to party quotas, but they differ in that they merely establish a goal for the increased recruitment of women. Sometimes this entails specifying a particular percentage, proportion, or numeric range – making them very much like quotas, although less binding – but sometimes it simply involves a vague commitment to recruiting more female candidates. Party targets are in many ways functionally equivalent to party quotas, and they are often, but not always, preferred by parties who are ideologically opposed to the notion of quotas, but who are otherwise committed to the goal of increasing female parliamentary presence.
- iii. *National legislative quotas*, finally, are national policies requiring that political parties nominate a certain percentage or proportion of women among their candidates. These quotas are embedded in constitutions or in electoral laws, and sometimes both, making them applicable to all political parties within that country. These differ from reserved seats in that they address political party selection practices, or inputs into the selection process, rather than the final proportion of women in parliament, or outputs of the selection process.⁽¹⁰⁾

(10) This section is a direct citation from footnote 18 of Krook, Mona Lena Candidate Gender Quotas: A Framework for Analysis. Paper presented at the 2nd General Conference of the European Consortium for Political Research, Marburg, Germany, 18–21 September 2003, <http://www.essex.ac.uk/ecpr/events/generalconference/marburg/papers/2/5/Krook.pdf>.

At a three-day seminar attended by politicians and researchers from Latin America, participants noted that while countries with quotas elect more women to their national legislatures, political parties still tend to exclude women – they are often reluctant to implement affirmative action measures or seek ways to circumvent quotas. Participants highlighted a number of lessons learned from the region’s experience with quotas, for example noting that changes in party and campaign financing can benefit women. Though research is limited, the few studies that exist show that women benefit when accounting is transparent, there are reasonable limits on spending and there is public financing.⁽¹¹⁾ Participants also suggested that the impact of quota laws depends on the structure and characteristics of the country’s electoral system.

B. The Impact of Electoral Systems on the Representation of Women: Proportional Representation Versus “First-Past-the-Post” Electoral Systems

Canada’s electoral system is a “single-member plurality” or “first-past-the-post” system. In every federal electoral district, the candidate with the most votes wins a seat in the House of Commons and represents that riding as its Member of Parliament. It has been argued that this system tends to discourage the election of women and other under-represented groups.

An alternative to the first-past-the-post system, and one that is supported by many advocates of greater gender equality in legislatures, is proportional representation (PR).⁽¹²⁾ Most of the countries in which women occupy at least 30% of parliamentary seats use a PR system. Although there are many variations of PR, the most widely used form is the *list system*, whereby each party presents a list of candidates and receives seats in proportion to its overall share of the national vote. In the *mixed member system*, voters elect a certain proportion of the legislature from single-seat, “winner-take-all” districts while the remaining members are chosen from lists based on the proportion of votes obtained by each party.⁽¹³⁾

Although PR electoral systems are often discussed as a potential solution to the under-representation of women, critics caution that these systems do not necessarily benefit

(11) International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *Women in politics: What has been the impact of gender quotas?*, http://www.idea.int/americas/impact_of_gender_quotas.cfm?renderforprint=1& (accessed 7 August 2009).

(12) For more information on proportional representation, see Michael Dewing and Megan Furi, *Proportional Representation*, TIPS-120E, Parliamentary Information and Research Service, Library of Parliament, Ottawa, 5 July 2004, <http://pintrabp.parl.gc.ca/apps/tips/tips-cont-e.asp?Heading=16&TIP=106>.

(13) Women’s Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), *Getting the Balance Right in National Parliaments*, 1995, <http://www.wedo.org/files/5050factsheet4.pdf>.

women. As long as parties still exercise discretion in drafting the list of candidates, there is no assurance that these lists will be more gender-balanced. Proportional representation works best in environments, such as the Nordic countries, where the electorate has high expectations for equality between men and women, and thus pressures parties to ensure that lists are gender-balanced. Other commentators have noted that, in order to successfully increase the representation of women, proportional representation systems need to be supplemented by additional incentives for parties to ensure parity on party lists.