A Cross-National Analysis of Women’s Descriptive Representation

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Abstract

Women’s representation in legislatures and parliaments has been increasing for decades, though at varying paces across states. Variable paths to increasing female descriptive representation can be identified. Research has identified some of the primary causes and effects of increasing female political leadership. As part of this effort, Alexander (2012) noted the strong positive and bidirectional connection between an increasing belief in the women’s ability to govern and the growth in female descriptive representation. This paper analyzes this connection in greater detail, identifying two sets of countries that stand apart from the general trend. One set of countries has stronger female representation in national government than attitudes would predict, largely due to the existence of effective gender quotas. A second cluster of countries with strong positive attitudes towards women in government does not elect a commensurate number of female representatives to their legislatures. This paper suggests that ineffective quotas and institutional barriers explain this second category of countries that deviate from Alexander’s “virtuous cycle.” We examine cases in which the relationship between attitudes toward women and elections of women falters. This analysis provides a greater appreciation of how state-specific institutions and attitudes can undermine progress toward better descriptive representation of women.

Introduction

“Ultimately, the analyses show that the most accurate portrayal of the relationship between women’s presence in parliament and women’s beliefs in women’s ability to govern is a virtuous cycle of mutually reinforcing changes in women’s empowerment as political leaders” (Amy Alexander 460).

“A paucity of women in positions of power creates a vicious cycle. When women are grossly underrepresented in government and in the law and in the corporate boardroom, other women are less likely to believe that they belong in positions of power” (Sandra Day O’Connor 200).

In 2008, U.S. voters celebrated the election of Barack Obama to the presidency as symbolic of growing inclusiveness and leadership roles of diverse American populations. While recognizing Obama’s landmark victory, some women who supported his Democratic primary opponent, Hillary Clinton, couldn’t help be reminded that women were still not adequately represented in the U.S. political landscape. While optimists note that female political representation has slowly increased, others wonder why the U.S. lags so far behind its main OECD counterparts in the ability to elect women into positions of leadership. As the first female U.S. Supreme Court Justice, Sandra Day O’Connor, suggested, there seems to be a “vicious cycle” contributing to the paucity of U.S. women in positions of power.

To what extent is the United States case exceptional? Examining female political leadership across time and across dozens of country cases, we identify various paths taken by clusters of countries as they experienced the growth of female political leadership. The International Parliamentary Union (IPU) data indicates that since 1997, the level of female representation in legislative bodies at the national level has increased overall from 11.7 percent in 1997 to 22.2 percent in 2014. Still, that transition has varied significantly among states. We can identify three distinct patterns in this transition. First, several northern European countries, including the Scandinavian states, the Netherlands, and Germany, elected women to national office earlier than other countries. Today they seem to have reached a plateau and maintain strong levels of consistent female descriptive representation (Figure 1). A second group has experienced much more gradual increases in female political representation, and at a lower level overall. In this second category, we can identify a diverse set of states including Chile, Hungary, India,
Japan, and the US. In these cases, growth has been gradual. These states continue to have less than 20 percent of their lower (or only) legislative institution constituted by women (Figure 2). A third group of states have seen rapid change in the past two decades, sometimes with sudden upward shifts in the growth of female representation. This category of countries includes Belgium, Costa Rica, France, Portugal, and Slovenia. Most of these states started with relatively low levels of female descriptive representation in 1997, but now come closer to category one than category two (Figure 3).

What explains these variable pathways to growing national female political leadership? How can we explain why political representation of women has grown equally slowly in countries such as Turkey, India and the United States? One important contributing factor is the “virtuous cycle” that characterizes the interaction between changing attitudes and growing female descriptive representation (Alexander 2012). There is a mutually reinforcing relationship between positive perceptions of women’s leadership and election of female leaders. As she notes, “...the most accurate portrayal of the relationship between women’s presence in parliament and women’s beliefs in women’s ability to govern is a virtuous cycle of mutually reinforcing changes in women’s empowerment as political leaders” (460).

While largely agreeing with Alexander’s findings, this paper attempts to add more nuance to her analysis, examining cases which deviate from Alexander’s findings. One set of outliers are countries in which elections of female representatives has outpaced public opinion of women leaders. In these cases, institutional change has preceded attitudinal change. In a second cluster of cases, public support for women in leadership positions has not been matched by equivalent gains in office. In sum, we focus attention on cases in which the “virtuous cycle” is not functioning ideally. Forward movement in these cases is largely impeded by structural and institutional obstacles.

Literature Review

Underrepresentation of women in the political sphere is an international phenomenon of massive proportions. Worldwide, women make up only an average of 20 percent of national legislatures and parliaments. The research devoted to studying this enormous inequity is not commensurate with the scale of the problem; nonetheless, there are a host of studies have focused on female political underrepresentation, its causes, and its impact.

Any analysis of women in government must begin by acknowledging the varieties of representation and the potential disjuncture between substantive and descriptive representation (Pitkin 1967). While acknowledging that democratic institutions need not precisely mirror the electorate, the literature notes the underrepresented groups can benefit from increased symbolic representation (Mansbridge 1999; Sapiro 1981; Young 2000). Demonstrating the importance of role models, Wolbrecht and Campbell (2007) note that presence of high profile women in politics positively affects the expectation among younger women that they will participate in politics. Childs and Krook (2009) find evidence of the importance of a “critical mass” in women’s political representation. As Alexander (2012) argues, “Descriptive representation potentially reverses the harmful internalization of women’s inferiority in political leadership … challenging the notion that women are absent because they are unfit to govern” (439).

A number of studies focus exclusively on the United States, provide ample evidence that seeing women vying for and occupying U.S. political office leads women in the electorate to be more well-informed and to participate at higher rates (Sapiro and Conover 1997; Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001; Atkeson
Analyzing U.S. NES data from 1980-1998, Lawless finds a less potent relationship between female representatives in Congress and female constituents’ political attitudes. Controlling for party congruence between the constituent and the representative, Lawless and Fox (2004) find that women represented by women offer more positive evaluations of their members of Congress, but that this does not consistently translate into political behavior.

Cross-national analysis of the relationship between political attitudes and descriptive representation is less common, but several studies find evidence that the growing presence of women in national legislatures does positively influence general female political participation and engagement (Desposato and Norrander 2009). In a comparative study of 31 states, Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler (2005) find that female citizens have greater confidence in parliament when women hold a larger number of seats in the lower house. Using the results of the World Values Survey (wave 5), Norris and Krook (2009) note a strong positive correlation between descriptive participation of women and women constituents’ political activity. They note, however, that the direction of causality is not established and that increased political activity among women constituents results in the election of more female representatives. As noted above, Alexander (2012) establishes the bidirectional nature of the relationship between political attitudes toward women leaders and increasing numbers of women in political office.

Given the significance of descriptive representation and its relationship to changing political attitudes, it is important to understand the factors that advance or impede the growth of female political representation. In their study of “Why Men Rule,” Lawless and Fox (2012) offer seven factors that suggest help determine whether female candidates enter the political arena. Their focus is on the potential candidates’ political ambition and external cues that may help trigger political interest among women (i.e. candidate emergence, or the supply of candidates). Drawing on polling data, Lawless and Fox identify family structure, lack of encouragement from political organizations, and negative perceptions of the political environment as the most important reasons for female political underrepresentation in the U.S. These factors, while important, do not explain the institutional reasons for the lack of female representation. While explaining why women may be less eager to run, Lawless and Fox de-emphasize the political rules and institutions that prevent women from participating.

A separate but equally important literature investigates whether descriptive representation translates into substantive representation. When growing numbers of women hold office are they more likely to represent “women’s interests”? Comparing the gender composition and legislative outcomes of municipal councils in Norway, Bratton and Ray (2002) find a strong relationship between women in office and the growth of day care provided. Bratton (2005) rejects the notion that a specific number of women are necessary in order for them to successfully tackle “women’s issues.” Comparing data from U.S. state legislatures, Bratton finds evidence that in cases in which women are severely underrepresented (part of “skewed” legislatures), they are more likely to put their time into sponsoring legislation of greater import to women. She concludes that a “critical mass” is not necessary for substantive representation of women. Achieving greater gender equality in political representation improves the quality of policy-making in relation to women’s specific needs (Rosen 2011:318). Women’s health, family policy, and sexual harassment receive less attention when women are underrepresented (Hughes 2009; Wangenerud 2009). Thus, while substantive representation is not the subject of this analysis, we assume that greater descriptive representation will have a positive impact on policy-making related to so-called “women’s issues.”
Furthermore, given the well-recognized “gender gap” in support for war and military spending (Conover and Sapiro 1993; Nincic and Nincic 2002), the percentage of women in legislatures has an important bearing on “guns v. butter” spending priorities and the military orientation of the state as well. Analyzing evidence from fourteen democracies between 2004 and 2013, Eichenberg and Stoll (2014) find that in calculating the “acceptability of war,” gender produced larger substantive effects than did any measure of the external threat. Thus the election of larger numbers of women to legislatures may improve the well-being of women and their families and significantly reduce the likelihood of war. Taken together, these studies provide ample evidence of the potential impact of election more female leaders.

Cross-national analysis of descriptive female representation generally focuses attention on institutional variations that impact levels of female representation. The most commonly noted “rules of the game” that are identified are electoral systems and quotas (Krook 2009; Franceschet et al 2012). Duverger (1955; 148) first noted that proportional representation (PR) electoral systems favor female candidates for office in a way that single member plurality (SMP) systems do not. More recent research continues to bear out this finding, suggesting that the emphasis on name recognition and personal characteristics that is associated with SMP systems disadvantages female candidates (Dahlerup and Friedenvall 2010). PR systems tend to focus votes on parties (not individual candidates) and tend to elect more female candidates. Other key institutional variables which impact female representation are (a) the rules for establishing the party lists in PR systems, (b) the rules governing the funding for political campaigns, (c) the rules governing terms limits, and (d) quotas, the focus of the next section of this paper.

**Quotas**

The establishment of legislative or party quotas for women is a key variable that determines the percent of women in parliament. Significant research has demonstrated the connection between electoral quotas for women and their representation in government (Rosen 2011; Schwindt-Bayer 2009; Tripp and Kang 2008; Dahlerup and Friedenvall 2005, 2010; Franceschet et al 2012). Quotas in some form have now been adopted in more than 110 countries, and most of these quotas have been implemented in the past twenty years or less (Dahlerup 2008). The importance of quotas in determining female descriptive representation cannot be understated. However, it is important to note that a wide variety of quotas are in place and that the mere presence of quotas will not necessarily increase the number of women in office. Rather, distinctions in the implementation and enforcement of quotas have significant impact on the election of women to national office. Studies that use quotas as a dichotomous variable inevitably misrepresent the importance of quota type, quota enforcement, and quota implementation.

Krook (2014) indicates that the study of quotas is a rapidly growing field of comparative political analysis and she calls for a new conceptual analysis of gender quotas. The number of countries with quotas has undoubtedly grown, though the numbers vary with the definition of quota employed. Voluntary or mandatory party list quotas are much more widely implemented. In the most common case, political parties in PR systems are required to submit candidate lists composed of a certain number of female candidates. Often ranking is also specified, most commonly in a system that alternates between male and female candidates. If the quotas are enforced, national electoral commissions have the power to reject candidate lists that do not conform to the female composition rules. Party list quotas can only be implemented in proportional representation or mixed systems. Even among PR systems, there are a variety of forms these quotas can take. They may be mandatory and enforced for all parties, or they may be voluntary and thus only implemented by some parties (Franceschet et al 2012). The percent of
female candidates required can vary, as can their placement on the list. Countries can insist upon a “zipper system,” alternating between male and female candidates (Slovenia) or they can freely relegate all female candidates to the bottom of the list (Greece). Outcomes will, of course, reflect the stringency and enforcement of these rules.

Reserved seat quotas are the easiest way to ensure that women will hold office, and they stand in direct contrast to party list or candidate quotas. Currently, at least ten countries reserve seats in the national legislature for women. These include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Eritrea, India, Iraq, Morocco, Pakistan, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda. For a variety of reasons, quotas that reserve seats for women are more controversial than party-based candidate list quotas as a means to increase the number of women in parliament. Bauer (2008:359) notes that with reserved seats, “a two-tiered system of legislators may emerge ... that relegates separately elected representatives in ‘women’s seats’ to an inferior status and diminishes their legislative accomplishments.” Although reserved seats take the pressure off parties to find and nominate female candidates (Matland 2006), they can also create a hierarchy among women politicians who devalue special seats. This has been documented in Tanzania (Makinda, cited in Lowe-Morna 2004:73) and in Uganda (Goetz 2003). In Rwanda, Schwartz (2004) surveyed MPs and noted that the majority knew which women MPs were elected to reserved seats. She also found that the women elected to reserved seats were far less experienced than the women elected via party candidate lists. In cases such as these, reserved seats have the potential to undermine the legitimacy conferred on women leaders or on the legislature itself. Journalists and academics alike have bemoaned the “politics of tokenism” (Narayan 2003) that awards reserved seats to candidates who did not “earn” them.

Reserved seat quotas do not necessarily permanently stigmatize women as “quota women.” Systematic analysis in Bangladesh (Nazneen and Tasneem 2010), where reserved seats for women have been in place at the local level since 1997, indicates that women leaders there have gained more legitimacy and greater political voice. Tanzanian women have used reserved seats as “stepping stones” to move into constituency-based seats (Yoon 2011). In India, where one seat per region is reserved for a woman, Nanivadekar (2006) finds reserved seats are effective tools for advancing women’s leadership. She argues that “quotas indicate that underrepresentation of marginal groups is not a statement of the groups’ poor performance but of the system’s poor performance at creating a level playing field” (119). In Uganda, O’Brien (2012) provides evidence that women elected to reserved seats are no less meritorious or more elite than there traditionally elected counterparts.

Quotas play a vital role in explaining why there is not a linear relationship between level of socio-economic development and the level of female representation in government. Certain richer countries such as Israel, Japan, and the U.S. have low levels of female government leadership and no form of quota in place. Some relatively poor countries such as Uganda, Rwanda, and Tanzania have implemented quotas and many more women in their parliaments (Rosen 2011). Electoral quotas play an important part in electing women in these post-conflict and post-colonial states. In many cases, (South Africa, Rwanda, Slovenia, Iraq, Afghanistan), drawing up new constitutions and reconfiguring parliaments provides an opening for quotas to be established (Matland 2006).

However, electoral quotas for women do not ensure their representation. The introduction of female election quotas in party lists can have a dramatic and immediate impact, as has occurred in Slovenia and Senegal, or it may have very little effect at all. Quotas are unlikely to have little impact if (a) there is no consequence to ignoring the law (Chile); (b) there are “escape clauses” for parties that cannot identify
“qualified” candidates (Greece); or (c) candidates are not funded or otherwise supported by the party leaders (Brazil). In Georgia, the quota policy provides financial rewards for parties that have at least 30 percent of candidate lists comprised of women. To date, no party has included enough women to receive this financial award (Quotaproject).

In sum, electoral quotas for women can help us better understand why some states elect larger than expected numbers of women to national office. The impact of quotas helps explain the outliers in Alexander’s data. However, as Franceschet et al (2012) note in their edited volume of gender quota case studies, it is extremely difficult to theorize about the impact of gender quotas across such dissimilar cases. Studying the impact of diverse quotas in diverse settings using diverse methods makes it difficult to draw significant conclusions. Still, we note that quotas and other electoral rules help explain the countries that deviate from Alexander’s virtuous cycle.

Updated Analysis of Alexander’s Virtuous Cycle

Alexander’s study is the first to offer longitudinal evidence of a bidirectional relationship between female descriptive representation and the belief in women’s ability to govern. She presents empirical evidence of this phenomenon between 1990 and 2005 across twenty-five country cases, controlling for socio-economic development, religious beliefs, communist legacy, and level of democracy. Alexander’s analysis reveals “a virtuous cycle of mutually reinforcing changes in women’s empowerment as political leaders” (2012; 460).

While recognizing that the transition to democracy led to “quota-induced gains in women’s presence in national parliaments” (460), Alexander focuses on how the women’s representation and public opinion of women are intertwined. Quotas, while acknowledged, are not part of her statistical analysis. Alexander suggests that having women in office will boost public support for additional gains as, “an increase in women in parliament contributes to an increase in women’s beliefs in women’s ability to govern” (460). This mutually reinforcing relationship, and its potential positive policy effects, is worth additional analysis. How do states initiate a virtuous cycle, and why do virtuous cycles function better in some cases than in others?

We suggest that an attempt to connect public opinion of women to their legislative representation must be viewed in light of the rules and institutions states adopt. Specifically, election quotas and the stringency of that state’s attempts to implement the quotas seems to have a vital impact. In examining quotas, it is clear that a variety of mechanisms are used (or not used) to enhance or temper their effects. Many analysts liken the implementation of gender quotas to affirmative action for minority populations, indicating the use of quotas to help women “break into” the system and begin to establish themselves in offices that they have not previously held. Like affirmative action, the assumption is that quotas are only necessary to break the barriers and get the virtuous cycle started. Indeed, some countries (such as Denmark) have reduced or eliminated the use of quotas as the number of female government leaders became well-established.

Research Design

The purpose of this analysis is to develop further our understanding of the relationship between women in national government and public opinion of women as political leaders. Clearly these phenomena are linked and mutually reinforcing. Still, there are cases in which confidence in women as leaders does not
translate into electoral results, and cases in which women are elected in spite of lagging public approval of women as office holders. Using updated data and an expanded sample, we aim to explore this relationship in detail and to present a more nuanced understanding of Alexander’s virtuous cycle. One key variable clearly is the institutional rules governing elections; in particular, the presence of quotas and the manner in which they are implemented has an impact on the connection between public opinion and women in office.

We use recent data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), providing the percentage of women in the lower house of the legislature (or only house in unicameral systems) in 56 countries in January 2010. For each of these country cases, we collected data from the World Values Survey sixth wave (2010-2014), variable 51, that provides survey responses to the question, “On the whole, men make better political leaders than women do.” Respondents choose one of four options: (1) agree strongly, (2) agree, (3) disagree, or (4) strongly disagree. Our data on public opinion on women leaders combines the percent who answered (3) disagree or (4) strongly disagree, thus indicating that they do not believe that men make better leaders. The country-specific data are presented in Table 1. It is worth noting that these are the identical data sources used by Alexander; we merely updated the data and added more country cases.

Figure 4 is a scatterplot of these two variables. A strong positive correlation between female descriptive leadership and public opinion of female political competence is readily apparent, and the correlation coefficient is .543. This is significant at the .001 level. Thus, Alexander’s primary finding is borne out in the newer, expanded data. There is a continued positive relationship between public opinion of female leadership and the percent of females in the lower legislative body. Large numbers of respondents in states in the lower left-hand quadrant (Yemen, Egypt, and Qatar) believe that men are better political leaders. In these countries, only a small percent of women are elected to leadership positions. At the other end of the spectrum we find residents of northern European states, who respond that they believe men and women make equally strong leaders. In these states, 35-50% of the legislature is comprised of women. Between these two extremes are a number of country cases in which the virtuous cycle of perceptions and elections is taking place. In these cases, public opinion and election of women is proceeding apace and, using Alexander’s language, we surmise that these states are engaged in a “virtuous cycle.”

Our attention, however, is drawn to the states that fall outside this pattern. A primary objective of this analysis is to examine the countries that have deviated from the virtuous cycle. The scatterplot includes the trend line and a prediction interval marked by one standard deviation above and below the line of best fit. We adopt this relatively narrow parameter because the overall distribution of cases follows Alexander’s predicted relationship, and only one case, Rwanda, is a true outlier. In Rwanda, South Africa, and five other states, the election of women to the legislature falls outside the confidence interval and has, thus, outpaced public opinion. In a second set of nine states, positive public opinion of female leadership is not matched by electoral outcomes. These countries merit additional analysis and explanation in order to better understand why they are not following the more predictable pattern.

The Overachievers

We label as “overachievers” the states that elect women to the lower house of parliament at a rate that exceeds what public opinion of female leaders predicts. These countries are located above the prediction interval of one standard deviation from the trend line. For example, Sweden and the
Netherlands are cases in which both opinion and election of women leaders is very high, and the election of significant percentages of women to parliament is routine (Dahlerup and Friedenvahl 2005). More puzzling are the cases of Rwanda, South Africa, and Argentina in Figure 4, where public opinion of female leadership is not as strong and yet, in democratic elections, these countries elect large numbers of women to parliament. As described below, all three of these exceptional cases can be attributed to strong electoral and/or party quotas which are rigorously enforced.

Rwanda has the largest percent of women in its legislature in the world. Currently, 64 percent of seats in the lower house are held by women. Rwanda epitomizes what has been called the “fast track” model (Dahlerup and Friedenvahl 2005) in which election of women far outstrips public approval of female leaders. The large number of women in office should help jumpstart the public approval process, according to Alexander. In fact, in Africa as a whole, quota laws have put many countries on the “fast track,” as 25 of 48 countries have implemented electoral quotas for women. In Rwanda specifically, post-conflict quota laws underpin the rapid change as strong electoral laws were put into place with the revised Constitution of 2003 (Bauer 2008). Legislative seats are reserved for women, stipulating that, “The State of Rwanda commits itself that women are granted at least 30 per cent of posts in decision making organs” (Constitution, Article 9 [4]). In 2007, the Law on Political Organizations and Politicians was amended to require that party lists for all elective offices must contain at least 30 percent women candidates. There are no provisions regarding the rank order of women candidates in this PR system but parties have taken seriously their role in identifying women leaders.

The fact that a majority of legislators in Rwanda are female has, according to Burnet (2011), both positive and negative consequences. While women have gained more respect in some communities, Burnet’s assessment is that, “increased formal representation of women has not led to increased democratic legitimacy for the government (303).” There are legitimate concerns that cases in which female representation exceeds opinion may indicate a general lack of democratic legitimacy for the legislature. However, it also appears that over time Rwandan women in and out of political life have begun to experience growing voice and legitimacy, as they have in Bangladesh and India (Burnet 2011). Clearly, quotas helped jump start Rwanda’s virtuous cycle to such an extent that representation of women significantly still outstrips public approval. Only time and continued study will reveal whether gains in public approval for women leaders improves.

Unlike Rwanda, there are no legislative quotas or reserved seats for women in the South African parliament. Still, women hold 41 percent (163 of 400) of the seats in the lower house of the South African legislature. In this case, only voluntary party candidate quotas are in place; there is no national electoral law or constitutional provision for female representation. However, since the end of apartheid in South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC) has been the single party able to dominate the political landscape, consistently electing about two-thirds of all members of the legislature. In 2006, the ANC adopted a 50 percent gender quota in local elections. The quota was extended to national elections in 2009. Because the dominant party ensures that half of all candidates are women, a large proportion of the lower house is populated by women. We can say that the rules of this party have outpaced public opinion about women in leadership positions, as indicated in Figure 4. Like Rwanda, there are significantly more women in parliament than public approval would suggest. Still, these “overachiever” countries have set the process in motion. Britton (2005) found that female members of parliament were markedly more professionalized in the second parliament, compared to the first. She also noted that the
women became more representative of the country as a whole over time, and less likely to view issues through a gendered perspective.

Assuming Alexander’s virtuous cycle functions as described, the large numbers of South African women in leadership positions should gradually improve public opinion of female representation. Walsh (2012) finds that in spite of greater numbers of women in the legislature, women were not given leadership positions in the parliament and, “their voice and capacity for contestation remained constrained,” and “women’s rights stalled” (129). Thus, numbers in power do not necessarily ensure representation. In South Africa, as in Rwanda, numbers and public approval of women leaders are not in sync.

Argentina presents another interesting “outlier” in the sense that public opinion of women in political leadership is outpaced by current female representation. In Argentina, quotas exist both for party lists and for legislative seats. In addition, the Argentinian electoral commission strictly enforces party candidate lists and will reject those that do not comply with the quotas. Bonder and Nari (1995) document the methods used by feminist organizations, Peronists, and other party officials as they collaborated to bring together support for quotas. First, in 1991, a new electoral law, the ‘Ley de Cupo Femenino’ was introduced requiring party electoral lists to have a minimum of 30 per cent women among their candidates for all national elections. In 1993, the law was extended to ensure that a minimum number of seats would have to be accorded to women and that at least one female would have to be put on the candidate list for every two males. If only two names are presented, at least one must be a women. In 2000, these rules were extended to all elections (Marx & Borner 2008: 5). The end result of the successful implementation of these rules is that in 2012, women leaders in Argentina exceeded expectations given public support for women in government. More than 38 percent of national legislators are female and approximately 69 percent of respondents disagreed with the idea that men make better leaders than women. Clearly, Argentinian quotas laws and the enforcement of these laws, has a significant impact on setting the “virtuous cycle” in motion. By 2014 (see Figure 5), Argentina’s public opinion and percent of women are more correlated, and Argentina no longer occupies the “overachiever” category. The qualifications and demographic characteristics of women elected by quotas do not differ significantly from men during the most recent period, and women and men were equally likely to benefit from nepotism (Franceschet and Piscopo 2012).

The case of Belarus is unlike the other “overachiever” cases noted above. The high percentage of women in national office is more tied to corruption and election-tampering than to any true democratic or legislative processes. Journalists and OSCE election officials agree that elections in Belarus have been non-competitive. President Lukashenko has ruled Belarus since 1994 and is widely understood to stifle political dissent. Amnesty International documents the jailing of political prisoners and the detaining of opposition party activists. Alexander Lukashenko won re-election in a landslide 2010 election that triggered mass protests. About 700 people arrested at that time are still in jail. The 2012 parliamentary elections were “not competitive from the start” and according to the OSCE, “not administered in an impartial manner” (Karmanau 2012). The two primary opposition parties, United Civic and BPF, boycotted the 2012 election, and therefore, the parliament is filled with Lukashenko’s supporters. According to Karmanau, not one opposition politician won a parliamentary seat in 2012. Given the non-democratic nature of elections in Belarus, it really is not fruitful to discuss the connection between public opinion and electoral outcomes in that country.
The Underachievers

We can identify a cluster of countries that have generally favorable public opinion about female leadership and yet fail to elect a commensurate proportion of women to their legislatures. Examining Figure 4, we note that these “underachievers” fall well outside the trend line that connects public opinion and electoral outcomes. Theories of representative democracy suggest that given the belief that men and women are equally capable of leadership, and that women in these countries should begin to hold a greater number of places in the national governing bodies. Yet in the U.S., Brazil, Chile, Slovenia, Uruguay, Colombia, and Cyprus, it seems that the wheel of the “virtuous cycle” has failed to turn. The gap between this cluster and the trend line suggests that even with strong levels of public approval for women in office, this diverse set of countries has failed to elect the expected number of women to office. Why do these states deviate from the expected pattern of behavior; that is, what is preventing the advancement of women into political life in these states?

Given the variety of cultures and electoral rules that characterize these countries, it seems unlikely that there is a singular explanation for the deficit of women in their legislatures. In her time-series analysis of 134 countries, Rosen (2011) notes a great deal of regional and case-specific variation must be used to explain the variation in female representation. Examining this cluster, we echo Rosen’s findings; indeed, these countries have dissimilar circumstances that are hindering women from entering national office. We find it impossible to pinpoint any one factor that characterizes these deviant cases. Still, we can identify some important factors that seem to prevent the virtuous cycle from occurring.

First, in some cases the gender quotas in place have not been faithfully implemented. For example, all of the Latin American countries in this cluster – Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Uruguay – have implemented some form of gender quotas. As noted above, gender quotas take many forms and are implemented with varying degrees of enforcement. Analysis of these four countries demonstrates that while quota legislation has been passed, its impact has been limited. In spite of quotas, the percentage of women elected to the lower house in 2014 was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Percent Women In Lower House 2014</th>
<th>Legislated Candidate Quotas</th>
<th>Voluntary Party List Quotas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uruguay</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Yes+</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolivia</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Yes+</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

+Quota is included in the national constitution

Other countries in the region have been much more successful at electing women in recent years. Bolivia, Argentina, Ecuador all have elected women to more than 35% of the legislature in 2014. These gaps in representation throughout Latin America cannot be explained simply as cultural or regional variation. Investigating the type of quotas and the implementation of the quotas in the “underachieving” countries reveals that all seven countries (with the exception of Chile) have legislated

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1 This study does not examine the case of Cyprus. Representation in the Cyprus parliament is complicated by the fact that the government reserves seats for the Turkish parties, but these groups opt to leave these seats vacant.
candidate quotas. All but Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador have voluntary political party quotas as well. Only Argentina and Ecuador have constitutional quotas. Thus, the type of quota itself is not the primary factor that influences the representation of women in the legislature. Despite having instituted quotas, these quotas simply have not worked to increase female representation in four of the seven cases. Either efforts have been made to undermine the usefulness of quotas in these cases, or they were designed to be ineffective from the start. Some details about the underachieving countries follows.

In Brazil quotas were first instituted in 1995. These quotas stipulated that in local elections, 20 percent of the party candidates must be female. In 1997, a new electoral law established that each party or coalition must include a minimum of 30 percent of each gender for elections at any level. In addition, a 2009 amendment to the electoral law requires that political parties use at least 10 percent of their free broadcast time and 5 percent of their public campaign funds to promote women’s participation in politics. A decade later, despite electing a female president in 2014 (in an election against another female candidate), and despite the fact that 52% of the voters in the last election were female, women still comprise just 10 percent of the lower house of parliament. Alcantara (2014) identifies this as the “Brazil paradox” -- the low rate of female representation stands in stark contrast to the strength of the Brazilian feminist movement.

Moura (2014) believes this is due, at least in part, to the fact that female candidates are recruited to fulfill the quota rather than to run a serious campaign. Brazilians refer to these token aspirants as “orange candidates.” She also notes that in most cases the six primary parties in Brazil have failed to meet the quotas. The electoral law has not been enforced and the parties were still allowed to submit their male-dominated candidate lists. In addition, although rules were established in order to guarantee some spending in support of female candidates, parties are not actually investing a significant portion of their public air time or campaign funds on female candidates. Another contributing factor is cited by Araujo (2003), who suggests that the open list system in Brazil (in contrast to closed list systems in some other Latin American countries) allows for voters to express their support for candidates rather than party lists. As occurs in the U.S., this type of voting for specific candidates appears to work against electing women. Thus, for a variety of reasons, Brazil has not elected women to office in numbers that are suggested by favorable public opinion of female leaders. A variety of electoral rules, together with weak implementation of quotas, provides some explanation. Miguel (2012:117) finds that in Brazil, “they [quotas] are not a panacea. The political field has its own rules which undermine the representation of subaltern groups.”

In Uruguay, evidence indicates that intentional efforts have been made to avoid the successful implementation of female electoral quotas. In 2009, the country passed a gender quota bill designed to ensure that women comprise 33 percent of each of the two legislative chambers. The negotiations over implementation of the bill were long, however, and the bill was first implemented three years later, applying only to parties’ internal elections. The 33 percent rule was first applied to the general national election in 2014, and enforced only as an experiment (Caraboni 2014). Parties engaged in tactics to dodge the requirement for women on their lists. For example, parties were required to put women in at least every third spot on the lists, so that they would not list all women at the bottom. However, no party put a women in the top spot on its list. This reduced the number of women elected to office. Furthermore, parties tended to place the same women on separate lists for both the upper and lower chamber. Women who won both places were forced to cede one. Finally, while the electoral court was given the power to enforce the new rules, no party lists were rejected and no fines were issued to non-
compliant parties. Marty (2015) reports that a number of “quota women” relinquished their seats to men once they were elected, enacting a “loophole” in the quota law. Still, Uruguay analysts (UN 2014) believe that change is coming soon to Uruguay. Women in Uruguay are politically active and women make up 64 percent of university students. In a country that has legalized abortion and same-sex marriage, the political participation is likely to grow rapidly now that quotas have been established. However, it remains to be seen whether the quota laws will soon set a virtuous cycle in motion in Uruguay.

To date in Chile, the only voluntary party quotas are in place to help women secure seats. Though this may seem an obvious reason for the paucity of women in government, we should recall that many European and African states (including South Africa) only have voluntary party quotas. In Chile, quotas govern the party lists compiled by three important Chilean parties: the Christian Democrats (PDC), Socialists (PS), and the Party for Democracy (PPD). These parties combine to hold about half of the 120 seats in Chile’s Chamber of Deputies. Thus, if the quotas were enforced, these parties could elect a substantial number of women to national government. However, although Chile’s voluntary party quotas stipulate that men are not allowed to hold more than 70 percent of the seats on these parties’ lists, these provisions have been weakly enforced. Quotaproject, the global database that compiles and reports on women’s electoral quotas, indicated that party quotas in Chile are “not adhered to in practice.” In 2014, Chile elected its first female president, Michele Bachelet. Yet Chile is one of the most traditional countries in Latin America. Divorce only became legal in 2004, and in spite of its standing as “highly developed” by the UN Development Program (UNDP), Chile ranked 75th among 109 nations on the UNDP Gender Empowerment Measure. Thus, some combination of weakly enforced party quotas and traditional culture results in the fact that today women make up only 16 percent of the Chile’s Chamber of Deputies. Grey (2003) notes that the voluntary party quotas are not having the desired effect. “The electoral quotas … in Chile are weak in both principle and implementation, and they have not been very effective in improving women’s representation beyond party institutions” (69). Grey also notes that male party leaders often subvert the minimum gender quotas by placing women in competition against each other, thereby meeting the numerical percentage of candidates while eliminating one electable female candidate. Like Brazil and Uruguay, Chile does not have female representation in parliament that would be expected given public approval. The status quo leaders have been able to deny full implementation of the quotas and the virtuous cycle in Chile is delayed.

Slovenia also falls in this cluster countries dubbed as “underachievers,” given public opinion that supports female leadership and a relatively small percentage of women in office at the time of the survey (2012). However, the revised quota law that was implemented in Slovenia in 2014 resulted in a very significant increase in women in the lower house of parliament. Seats held by women rose from 14 percent in 2010 to 36 percent in 2014. (Note that Slovenia goes from being an underachiever/outlier in Figure 4 to being within one standard deviation of the trend line in Figure 5.) The quota law that passed in 2009 and was first implemented in the 2014 clearly had a very important impact on the results. The law states that women must comprise 35 percent of each party list. This law is strictly enforced by the Slovenian Elections Commission. We can easily see the results of a straightforward quota law when it is taken seriously. As Dahlerup (2006) has noted, key issues in the success of quotas are the ordering of female candidates and sanctions for non-compliance. In contrast to Brazil and Uruguay, implementation of the quota rule was successful in Slovenia. Indeed, by 2014, Slovenia dramatically increases the percent of women elected and is no longer part of the cluster of “underachiever” countries.
Three of the countries that have female representation that is at least one standard deviation below the expected trend line have no electoral quotas for women at all: Lebanon, Ukraine, and the United States. Lebanon and Ukraine have much lower public opinion of women in leadership and very low levels of female representation. These two countries fall outside the expected trend line but not within the cluster of “underachievers” since they are still at the very early stages of introducing women into the political process. On the other hand, the United States is clearly a case in which the election of women to the House of Representatives has not kept up with public opinion in the U.S. or other countries that are categorized as “highly developed” by the UN. Indeed, the U.S. is deviating far from what one might expect given strong public confidence in female leadership and given the U.S. level of socioeconomic development.

To what extent does this deficit of female political leaders reflect gender bias and/or institutional bias? Our argument is that rules and institutions are the primary reason why women have not made a more important impact on legislative offices to date. Clearly, the U.S. electoral system separates it from the majority of countries discussed above. The U.S. has a long history of personality politics as a result of its single member plurality (SMP) electoral system. Norris and Krook (2009:13) demonstrate that the impact of descriptive representation is stronger in single member districts, since this structure tends to focus voters on candidates’ personal characteristics, names, and genders. In PR systems, the focus is on the party and the descriptive characteristics of individual representatives is less obvious. Campaigns and voters in the U.S. place much more emphasis on the personality and the character of the individuals who run for office in national elections, at least relative to what typically occurs in PR systems. The personal lives of individual candidates come under a microscope and small details can create public relations nightmares. In recent years, U.S. debates have included details such as Barack Obama’s lapel pin and Barney Frank’s lisp. In this environment, any characteristic outside the norm seems to invite particular scrutiny. Women candidates know this well.

Another crucial factor preventing women from being elected to the U.S. Congress is the extreme advantage of incumbency in the U.S. winner-take-all system. The focus in the U.S. is on personal politics and constituency service. Combined with importance of name recognition and personal financing of campaigns (often via special interest groups), candidates running for Congress against incumbents face enormous obstacles (Alford 1981). In November 2014, 96 percent of all incumbents who ran for re-election to the House of Representatives were re-elected. Although members of the U.S. public dislike Congress as a whole (public approval ratings tend to be in the 13-15 percent range), they admire and re-elect their individual representatives. The average years of service of a member of the U.S. House of Representatives stands at 10.3 years, with 22 percent of current members serving more than 16 years (Glassmen and Wilhelm 2015). Naturally, high incumbency rates excludes the election of new members, including women and minorities.

Even without gender bias, there is bias in favor of the status quo. Two important cross-national studies of incumbency advantage provide additional evidence of its importance in excluding women from legislatures. Examining national parliaments in 25 established democracies, Matland and Studlar (2004) found that two-thirds of all incumbents were elected to the lower house of the national parliament. Across countries with majoritarian election systems, the authors found that 75 percent of incumbents were re-elected. Similarly, Schwindt-Bayer (2005) finds that across 33 legislatures, higher incumbency retention rates reduce the likelihood of women being elected, controlling for socioeconomic statues, electoral rules, and gender quotas. Any group not currently in office will have trouble accessing
leadership in the U.S. Thus it is fair to say that women are excluded more because the rules of the game favor the status quo, and not primarily due to gender biases. As the data in Table 1 shows, Americans supports women as leaders.

Schwindt-Bayer (2005) also finds a positive relationship between term limits in legislatures and the election of female representatives. Term limits have been implemented in several U.S. states in recent years, as part of an effort to ameliorate the impact of incumbency advantage. While critics consider these term limits inherently undemocratic, advocates acknowledge that term limits enable a larger, more diverse pool of candidates to attain political leadership positions. Carroll and Jenkins (2001) find that U.S. women increased their numbers more in U.S. states with term limits from 1998-2000 than in states without term limits. But while terms limits have been implemented at the state level (36 U.S. states have gubernatorial term limits and 15 state legislatures have term limits), they are very unlikely to be implemented in the House of Representatives. The U.S. constitutional amendment process is rife with barriers to success.

Another crucial factor that prevents women from entering the political arena in greater numbers in the U.S. is the American system of campaign finance. Although complex and beyond the scope of this paper, it is certain that running for Congress is extremely expensive. The single most expensive item, television and other media time, is most often limited or supplied as a common good in other countries. In addition, single member districts make for highly decentralized, personalized campaigns. These stand in stark contrast to the more centralized, party-focused campaigns of PR systems. In Europe and Latin America, a much greater share of campaign expenses is available from public coffers. Government limits on spending and the length of campaigns further limits the cost of running in many other countries relative to the U.S. (IDEA 2014).

TV advertising is the single largest expense for most American congressional candidates, while in many other countries candidates are either forbidden from advertising on television or given free TV time. In most places there’s substantial public funding of campaigns, and candidates are often forbidden from campaigning until a relatively short period before election day. Put all that together, and you have elections where, even if it would technically be legal to rain huge amounts of money down on candidates, nobody considers it worth their while (Waldman 2014).

As a result of the money-intensive U.S. campaign system, women and other inexperienced and poorly connected candidates are at a distinct disadvantage. Without huge personal fortunes or connections to people and organizations with tremendous resources, an election is doomed. Raising enough money to compete at the national level is virtually impossible without a sizeable war chest. Party resources flow to candidates who appear to be viable as they “bet on the winning horse.” In traditional circles, women do not often appear to be the most electable candidates. Thus, in the U.S. case, Alexander’s virtuous cycle is perhaps better characterized as a vicious cycle in which women cannot get the funds to run and thus cannot be elected. If they are not elected, they certainly cannot be re-elected. While gender bias plays a role, the phenomenon of incumbency advantage is also extremely important. Without institutional changes, election of women to the U.S. Congress will lag dramatically behind public confidence in women’s leadership capabilities and the virtuous cycle cannot be adequately set in motion.

In the end, we note that the “overachievers” are a diverse group of countries that are not linked by region, socioeconomic status, or quota rules. Rather, by examining closely several country cases, we find that rules and institutions are important, and the relationship between public opinion of female leaders and the election of female representatives is complex.
Conclusion

The general relationship between public approval of female leaders and election of women to legislative office has been established by Alexander. These phenomena are interconnected and reinforce one another. Although this relationship is well-established, we are interested in cases in which either public opinion or election of women lags behind expectations. In countries we label as “overachievers,” the number of women elected to national office has grown rapidly and faster than public approval of female leadership. Cases such as Rwanda, Argentina, and South Africa point to the importance of electoral quotas for promoting female representation and ultimately setting the virtuous cycle in motion. On the other extreme we find a number of states in which the number of women elected is not what public attitudes would suggest. In the cases we have dubbed “underachievers,” there are fewer women elected than public approval would predict. Close examination of these cases reveals poor enforcement of quotas, and purposeful attempts to undermine quotas by existing leaders. In the case of the United States, a number of important institutions protect incumbents and prevent women from occupying additional seats in Congress. With fewer women in office, attitudes are changing more slowly, which in turn, means fewer women are elected. Thus a vicious cycle of poor female representation emerges.

It seems clear that much of the variation in numbers of women elected to office is tied to the “rules of the game.” We acknowledge that institutions both reflect and create public attitudes. In many cases, this is a mutually reinforcing process that promotes women’s leadership. However, it is important to note that the cycle can also be obstructed with rules that favor incumbents, long-standing party leaders, and status quo power relationships.

The logical next step of this area of research is to assess the impact of descriptive representation of women on substantive representation of “women’s issues.” Research has already begun addressing this issue (Bratton and Ray 2002; Hughes 2009; Rosen 2011). As quotas help to elect large groups of women to legislatures, there will be additional data to assess the impact of descriptive on substantive representation. It is also important to assess whether women who are elected via quotas act differently in office than those elected without quotas. Is tokenism a genuine problem, and do the role model benefits of women in office outweigh the potential problems of tokenism? Mansbridge (2005: 643) notes that even when labeled ‘quota women’, increasing numbers of women in parliaments and legislatures, “shapes our collective perceptions of what political leaders should look like, where women’s place is, and by changing expectations, encourages a greater number of young women to enter party politics and run for elected office.” Research uncovering concerns with tokenism in Rwanda and elsewhere should be replicated to test Mansbridge’s optimism.

Another area of research that deserves further study is the relationship between female descriptive representation and general trust or confidence in government. Lawless and Fox (2012) indicate that there is a paucity of women who seek office in the U.S., and that the “supply problem” is a partial explanation for the poor representation of U.S. women in politics. At the local level in the U.S., better descriptive representation impacts citizen trust in government (Ulbig 2007). There seems to be no question but that, “increases in descriptive representation directly strengthens the legitimacy of the legislative body because it appears more open and accessible” (Phillips 1995; Atkeson and Carrillo 2007). Since descriptive representation in the U.S. tends to improve feelings about government, we should not be surprised that Congress is both not representative of the public and not well-liked. But does the paucity of women candidates result from disapproval of Congress, or does disapproval of Congress stem...
from its failure to better represent the American people? Although the number of women in Congress slowly increases in the U.S., to date there is more evidence of a vicious cycle than the sort of virtuous cycle identified by Alexander. Cross-national research of the link between female descriptive representation, quotas, and trust in government is an important next step as we try to understand the causes and consequences of male-dominated government.
Works Cited

https://www.opendemocracy.net/article/women_and_politics_the_brazil_paradox


Table 1: Public Opinion and Descriptive Female Parliamentary Representation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
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Sources:


Figure 1: High female, plateaued, parliamentary representation

Figure 2: Countries with gradual growth

Source: IPU Women in National Parliaments dataset, downloaded from:
http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.PARL.ZS/countries/1W?page=3&display=default
Figure 3: Countries with rapid growth

Figure 4: Gender Attitudes and Descriptive Representation (start of 2010)

Sources:

Figure 5: Gender Attitudes and Descriptive Representation (end of 2014)

Sources: