



Gender quotas and democracy: Insights from Africa and beyond

Mona Lena Krook

Department of Political Science, Rutgers University, 89 George Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08901, USA

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SYNOPSIS

Electoral gender quotas have been viewed as a way to promote greater inclusion and enhance the quality of democracy. They have also been criticized as 'artificial' solutions to women's under-representation in politics and as a means to bolster the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes. Mapping these debates, this epilog discusses three major contributions of the articles in this special issue, both on their own and in dialog with one another. The first two contributions are empirical, illustrating how democratic and non-democratic institutions, respectively, can promote women's representation through gender quotas. The third is the theoretical concept of 'sustainable representation,' or the role that quotas may or may not play in instituting durable changes in patterns of access to political office. Together, these case studies present new ways forward for fleshing out what quotas ultimately mean for women's empowerment and democratic development in both Africa and beyond.

Introduction

Increasing women's political presence has been proposed by activists and scholars around the globe as a means to enhance democracy, motivated by arguments that the inclusion of women is crucial for achieving justice, promoting women's interests, and making use of women's resources for the good of society (Phillips, 1995). Over the last twenty years, this demand has translated into the introduction of electoral gender quotas in more than 100 countries worldwide (Krook, 2009). This global trend has spurred dramatic, if uneven, jumps in the numbers of women elected to national parliaments – as well as inspired a growing literature on quotas. Initial work focused primarily on policy design, adoption, and implementation. A new wave of research has emerged, however, exploring their impact on legislator backgrounds, policy-making, public attitudes, and political engagement (Franceschet, Krook, & Piscopo, 2012), seeking to ascertain the broader 'meaning' of quotas for both women and democracy.

The articles in this special issue on democratization and gender quotas in Africa advance quota research in several important ways. First, they foreground experiences in a continent with some of the highest levels of female representation

in the world, with four countries ranked in the global top ten.¹ Achievements in Africa, however, are not well-known outside of country and regional specialists (Bauer, 2012). Second, in light of this focus, the articles raise new questions, propose new concepts, and provide new solutions for theorizing and empirically analyzing quotas – speaking, in particular, to issues of democracy and democratization, as well as to prospects for women's broader empowerment. Third, both individually and together, the contributions open up for closer scrutiny the mechanisms at work behind the contested relationship between women's representation and democracy. This epilog spells out these points in greater detail, connecting them to debates on quotas, representation, and democracy, and considers their implications for future research on politics in Africa and beyond.

Quotas, representation, and democracy

As traditionally conceptualized by political theorists and empirical political scientists, definitions of democracy and democratization have tended not only to overlook women's contributions, but also to exclude women as citizens (Paxton, 2000; Phillips, 1991). The result is that even if many non-gender scholars view 'inclusion' as central to the normative concept of 'democracy,' this insight has not been incorporated

into analyses assessing the democratic nature of different regimes (Caraway, 2004). Many cross-national studies thus find there to be little if any relation between the presence of democracy and high numbers of women in political office (Stockemer, 2011). Some researchers suggest that effects of democracy are obscured by the inclusion of rich and poor nations in the same dataset (Viterna, Fallon, & Beckfield, 2008), although a study comparing non-Western cases finds that women's representation does not increase with the maturity of democracy (Stockemer, 2009).

Focusing on cases of democratic transition, other work notes that the number of women in politics often decreases following the creation of new political institutions (Nechemias, 1994). A series of more recent contributions find that the nature of the transition and the passage of time may in fact condition this relationship. Factors like the history of women's mobilization, the reason for the transition, the political parties involved, and the role of international actors may lead to more or less favorable outcomes for women (Viterna & Fallon, 2008). Effects may also change over time: while women's representation in Africa generally falls in the first post-transition elections, it often improves in subsequent polls (Yoon, 2001), largely due to the accumulation of greater experience among women (Lindberg, 2004). Large cross-national studies validate this finding, observing that democracy does not initially favor women's representation but does contribute to growth over time (Paxton, Hughes, & Painter, 2010). These links are complex, with the factors affecting women's access varying with the length of a country's democratic experience (Tremblay, 2007). This has led some scholars to conclude that it is not democracy but rather change over time that matters (Fallon, Swiss, & Viterna, 2012).

The introduction of gender quotas adds a further layer to these discussions. On the one hand, quotas for women have been seen as a way to promote greater inclusion and thus enhance the quality of democracy. Being required to select women expands the pool of potential candidates, nominating qualified women who have been previously overlooked (Murray, 2010), while enhancing competition among men for the remaining slots (Besley et al., 2012). In terms of legislative activity, quotas can give women a mandate to promote women's issues (Franceschet & Piscopo, 2008), while also inspiring ordinary women to become more politically engaged (Geissel & Hust, 2005) and enhancing the legitimacy of democratic institutions (Schwindt-Bayer & Mishler, 2005). The diffusion of quotas has thus been viewed as intimately linked to the global spread of democracy (Ellerby, 2009) and democracy promotion efforts worldwide (Bush, 2011).

On the other hand, quotas are criticized as 'artificial' solutions to women's under-representation in politics, as a mechanism violating the rights of voters to select their preferred candidates (cf. Dahlerup, 2007) — and thus as fundamentally undemocratic. This interpretation, of course, relies on a 'free market' analogy of elections, when in fact parties play a strong role in structuring the options available to voters through candidate selection procedures (Krook, 2010). This perspective contrasts quotas with 'merit,' as promoting the election of low quality politicians and legislative outcomes that do not benefit women (Pupavac, 2005), in part because applying quotas may prevent women from gaining skills that would make them less vulnerable to manipulation (Cornwall & Goetz, 2005). Such dynamics may entrench inequalities in political participation

(cf. Zetterberg, 2009) and even undercut the strength of autonomous women's groups (Britton, 2005). Further, quotas may be interpreted cynically by citizens as reinforcing the authoritarian status quo (Bush & Jamal, 2011).

Quotas per se thus have a complicated relationship with democracy, with statistical work finding no relationship between the use of quotas and the level of democracy (Tripp & Kang, 2008). Case studies suggest, further, that the motivations and outcomes of quota adoption are ambiguous. In both democratic and authoritarian contexts, quotas may serve a variety of strategic purposes for political elites, meaning that they may be less about expanding rights to women than about preserving power or achieving other symbolic aims (Krook, 2009). Quotas can bolster ruling party dominance (Muriaas & Wang, 2012), as well as signal that the regime is 'modern' (Bush, 2011). Democracy may thus be needed for quotas to be meaningful, given that high female representation via quotas does not translate into real political power in authoritarian regimes (Nechemias, 1994).

Forging new research agendas

The articles in this special issue delve into these questions, exploring the relationships between quotas, democracy, and women's representation in a variety of African countries. On their own, and in dialog with one another, the articles in the collection provide at least three new insights. The first two contributions are empirical, illustrating how democratic and non-democratic institutions, respectively, can promote women's representation. The third is theoretical and concerns the concept of 'sustainable representation,' namely the role that quotas may or may not play in instituting durable changes in patterns of access to political office. Together, these arguments present new ways forward for fleshing out what quotas ultimately mean for women's empowerment and democratic development.

Kang (2013–this issue) addresses how democratic institutions, together with women's mobilization, have led to broad acceptance of gender quotas over the course of ten years in Niger. Similar to what occurred in several Latin American countries in the 1990s (Krook, 2009), women's groups effectively appealed to the courts system to ensure that quotas were respected and employed the free media to spread awareness of the quota among the general population. Along related lines, the political opening associated with the transition to a multi-party system in Uganda coincided with a sharp rise in the number of women's rights bills passed after 2006. Wang (2013–this issue) cautions, however, that this change has more to do with a shift in organizational strategies of the parliamentary women's caucus, made possible by the ability to organize somewhat autonomously from the ruling party.

All the same, as Tønnessen and al-Nagar (this issue) point out, democratic openings may not always translate into unmitigated advances in women's rights. They find that the post-conflict period in Sudan has opened up space and resources for women to mobilize and criticize the status quo. By the same token, these new opportunities have also made it possible for groups antithetical to women's rights to be heard, undercutting women's ability to make progressive policy change. A further barrier to substantive representation for women has been competition, rather than cooperation,

among women in government and civil society, a pattern observed in other democratizing contexts (Haas, 2010).

In contrast to these three articles, the case studies of Botswana, Rwanda, and South Africa suggest that non-democratic regimes may be more effective in promoting women's representation. As Bauer and Burnet (2013–this issue) write, Botswana has one of the lowest levels of female representation in Africa, despite being a longstanding democracy and women there enjoying a relatively high social and economic status. The reason, ironically, appears to be the country's history of stability, which has led to 'frozen' political institutions and few prospects for constitutional or electoral reform. In Rwanda, the opposite is the case, with new opportunities for women to mobilize for political change during post-conflict reconstruction. These gains are often credited to the commitment of the ruling party (Devlin & Elgie, 2008). The dominant African National Congress (ANC) party has been similarly crucial to ensuring the election of large numbers of women in South Africa. As the ANC has begun to face greater electoral competition, however, Muriaas and Kayuni (2013–this issue) observe that it has tended to nominate fewer women, largely due to an enhanced need to ensure that all factions in a particular district get safe seats.

This last article also speaks to the third insight emerging from this special issue, the concept of 'sustainable representation.' Introduced by Darhour and Dahlerup (2013–this issue), it refers to the durability of gains in women's numerical representation, should quotas later be withdrawn. Existing evidence is mixed. In some cases, women's representation dropped dramatically when quotas have expired or been overturned (Krook, 2009) or remained limited in the parts of the electoral system where quotas do not apply (Davidson-Schmich, 2010). In others, quotas have enabled women to win seats after these have been de-reserved (Bhavnani, 2009) or to successfully contest seats not subject to the quota (Shin, forthcoming). These variations have led Bjarnegård and Zetterberg (2011) to theorize conditions under which quotas might fundamentally alter – or not – recruitment practices in gender equal ways.

Darhour and Dahlerup (2013–this issue) propose three indicators of sustainable representation in the case of Morocco: the number of women in reserved versus open seats, whether reserved seats serve as a point of entry to open seats, and whether quotas provisions have been strengthened over time. While the third has occurred, the same cannot be said about the other two: few women are elected to open seats and there is no crossover whatsoever between the two types of seats. The dynamics in Tanzania are slightly different: while few women occupy open seats, it is more common for women in the special seats to use these as a stepping stone for contesting constituency seats. Further, despite many years of using reserved seats, members of parliament still tend to see quotas as a transitional measure, leading to the introduction of a limit on how many terms someone can occupy a reserved seat, in the hope that this might help expand the numbers of women contesting open seats (Yoon, 2013–this issue).

Conclusions

The articles in this issue thus present important new contributions for quota research, fleshing out, in particular, the complicated relationship between quotas and democracy

in Africa and beyond. They also address an important new indicator of the symbolic effects of quotas, that of 'sustainable representation.' These perspectives open up what actors might project quotas to achieve, as well as temper expectations about the ability of quotas to empower women or enhance democracy on their own. In theorizing and exploring the mechanisms by which political change may or may not be advanced through quotas, the authors collectively chart a rich new research agenda for future research.

Endnote

¹ <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm> (accessed May 20, 2013).

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