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Quota or not Quota? On Increasing Women's Representation in Politics

All over the world, politics remains one of the most male-dominated spheres in society, in spite of the substantial progress in achieving more gender balance made in the last decades. A large number of countries worldwide have adopted some form of electoral gender quotas to accelerate this progress, but the empirical evidence on the effectiveness of such policy tools is mixed.

In this policy brief, we first discuss the potential impacts of gender quotas. Quotas may (a) increase women's representation in political positions, or decrease it, if there are backlash effects; (b) improve or worsen the quality of selected politicians; and (c) bring about important policy changes, given the wealth of empirical evidence of gender differences in policy preferences, with, for instance, women appearing more concerned about health and the health system than men. We then provide an overview of the empirical evidence on quota impacts in the economics literature, and contextualize these findings with a special focus on the countries of the FREE (Forum for Eastern Europe and Emerging Economies) network. We end with policy advice on the design of gender quotas in the domain of politics.

Quotas in the World and in the FREE Network Region

According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 127 countries worldwide currently use quotas with the goal of increasing the presence of women in governmental institutions. Broadly speaking electoral gender quotas can be classified into *seat reservation* and *candidate lists quotas*. The former limit the competition for a governmental seat to women, whereas the latter prescribe a minimum representation of women in electoral lists. Candidate quotas can be *legislated*, i.e. they constitute a legal requirement, or *voluntary*, whereby parties adopt quotas in their internal statute. In the FREE Network region, only Armenia, Poland and Sweden dispose of electoral gender quotas (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Gender quotas in the FREE Network region



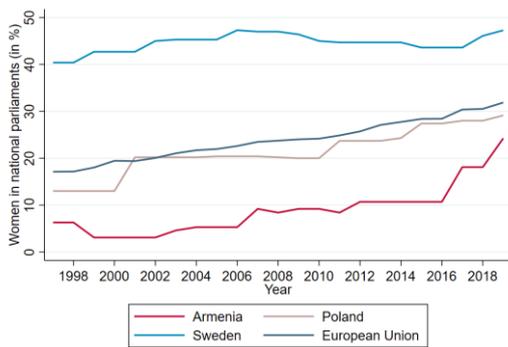
Note: the FREE Network region is marked in light red, the countries in the region with quota are marked in dark red.
Source: SITE, 2020

Since 2011, Armenia has had a legislated candidate quota of 40% for its National Assembly. This quota replaced a previous quota of 15%, passed in 2005 - one of the requirements to enter the Council of Europe (Itano 2007). Poland has also had a legislated candidate quota of 35% for the Lower House (the Sejm) as well as for subnational elections since 2011 (IDEA 2020; World Bank 2019). Sweden, the fourth most gender equal country worldwide according to the 2020 ranking of the World Economic Forum, and ninth in the women's political empowerment sub-index, does not have legislated quotas. However, political parties themselves have decided to adopt *voluntary* quotas: the ruling Social Democrats use a zipper system in which the two sexes alternate on party lists; the Left Party has a minimum 50% quota for women, while the Green Party has a 50% gender quota (IDEA 2020). The Swedish Moderates, Liberals, Center parties and the extreme-right Swedish Democrats currently do not have gender quotas. The Swedish Democrats entered the parliamentary elections in 2018 with the highest share of male candidates observed among the Swedish parties - 70% (SVT 2020; SVT 2018).

In spite of their popularity among policy-makers worldwide, the merits of quotas are still largely debated. Opponents of gender quotas are often concerned about their effects on the meritocratic selection of politicians. Another common criticism is that nominating more female candidates may not automatically translate into more women in powerful positions. For instance, the shares of women in the Armenian and the Polish Parliament are 24 and 29% respectively (World Bank 2019), well below the national legislated candidate quota

(it bears noting, however, that these shares have been growing over the last ten years, as shown in Figure 3). The respective shares of female ministers are 7% and 23% (Government of the Republic of Armenia 2020; OECD 2020,).

Figure 2: Share of women in national parliaments (in %)



Data Source: World Bank 2020

Source: The authors' own rendering of World Bank Data (2020).

Why is increasing women's political participation considered a policy objective of utmost importance in many countries worldwide, and how can gender quotas help achieving it? In this brief we contribute to the ongoing debate on the merits of gender quotas, by offering an overview of their potential effects and by critically reviewing the empirical evidence from the most recent academic literature.

Which Effects Can We Expect From Quotas?

The primary objective of electoral quotas is to reduce gender gaps in representation in electoral lists and in the targeted representative institutions. Quotas can also activate trickle-up mechanisms, whereby gender gaps decrease in positions that are not directly targeted by the quota. The trickle up effect occurs, for instance, if women's networks

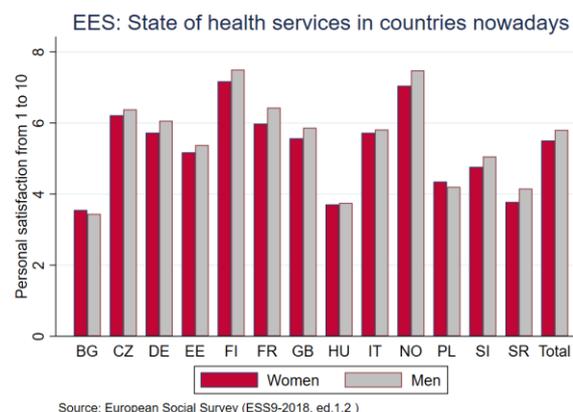
within parties or in governmental organizations help the promotion of female leaders. Furthermore, gender quotas may help to improve the quality of politicians. As noted by, among others, Bertrand (2018), a society likely improves the quality of its leaders when it enlarges the pool where those leaders are chosen from. A critical underlying assumption in this line of argument is that there are no major differences in the distribution of "political talent" between women and men. However, even with equal distribution of political talent, if the supply of women willing to enter politics is very limited and there are not enough qualified women to fill the quota positions, the average quality of a "quota" politician may end up being lower than that of her colleagues – and quotas may have the unintended consequence of reinforcing stereotypes against female politicians. This, in turn, may ultimately imply lower promotion rates of women to key positions and/or worse electoral support of female politicians, thereby undermining women's political empowerment at various levels.

One of the most popular arguments in favor of the adoption of gender quotas is that women's political preferences may not be adequately represented by male-dominated political bodies. Gender quotas, by increasing female representation among politicians (and possibly among voters), can thus help closing a potential gap in *substantial representation*. A large body of literature has documented gender differences in policy preferences, by considering, e.g. the size and composition of government spending after the expansion of suffrage to women (Kenny and Lott 1999), voting records in referenda (Funk and Gathmann 2015), survey data (see, e.g. Bagues and Campa 2020), or women's contributions to



legislative amendments (Lippmann 2020). In this historical moment when the world is plagued by a pandemic, the most important gender difference to emphasize seems to be in the area of health. Exploiting the federal referenda held between 1981 and 2001 in Switzerland, Funk and Gathmann (2015) show that Swiss women are more likely to be in favor of health, unemployment and social security spending than men, and less likely to be in favor of military spending. Similarly, based on survey data from a sample of nearly 60,000 Spanish residents, Bagues and Campa (2020) find that women are significantly more likely than men to report that the *health system* is one of the problems that affects them the most. Likewise, Lippmann (2020) analyzes the contribution of French legislators to amendments and finds that women are 25% more likely than men to initiate at least one amendment related to health issues. This gender difference regarding health policy is also visible in the European Social Survey, which covers a representative sample of the population of 19 European countries. When asked to give a general opinion on the current state of health services in their country, female respondents turn out to be significantly less satisfied than male respondents on average. The difference is statistically significant, albeit not particularly large (12% of a standard deviation) and holds in most of the countries included in the EES. One potential reason behind this noticeable difference in satisfaction with health services is that women also report lower health status than men (10% of a standard deviation and statistically significant).

Figure 3: Self-reported satisfaction with the current state of national health services



Source: The authors' own rendering of the European Social Survey (2018).

A natural question to ask in spring 2020 is whether a world with more women among political leaders would have had health systems better equipped to face a pandemic. While we will never have a definite answer to this question, studies of the impacts of gender quotas can help assessing whether the gender of political leaders matters for policy decisions.

What is the Empirical Evidence on the Effects of Quotas?

Quotas increase women's representation in electoral lists, but only when they are binding and appropriately enforced (i.e. the cost for parties of not complying with the quota must be high enough). Yet, when quotas are limited to the composition of electoral lists, the strategic positioning of female candidates in "not-winning" positions tends to undermine the quota effect on the election of women (see Esteve-Volart and Bagues, 2012, and Bagues and Campa, 2020). This seems to be the case of Poland: According to Gwiazda (2017), the lack of a placement mandate obliging parties to put women in the top positions of a party list, is indeed one reason why the Polish quota has not translated into a higher share of female representatives.



Table 1: Share of women in national parliaments (in %) FREE Network countries

	2000	2010	2019
Armenia	3.1	9.2	24.2
Belarus		31.8	34.6
Estonia	17.8	22.8	29.7
Georgia	7.2	6.5	14.8
Lithuania	10.6	19.1	21.3
Latvia	17.0	20.0	30.0
Moldova	7.9	18.8	25.7
Poland	13.0	20.0	29.1
Russia	7.7	14.0	15.8
Sweden	42.7	45.0	47.3
Ukraine	7.8	8.0	20.5

Source: World Bank Data (2020).

The evidence on the spill-over of quotas to higher positions is mixed. Two studies find that candidate quotas in Italy and Sweden increased the probability that women reach leadership positions, above and beyond the quota mandate (De Paola et al. 2010, O'Brien and Rickne, 2016). Bagues and Campa (2020), however, fail to establish similar evidence in Spain.

In studies of developing countries, Beaman et al. (2009) find that seat reservation in India improved male voters' perception of female leaders, as well as women's probability of being elected once the reservation was removed. Conversely, experimental evidence from Lesotho suggests that, if anything, a quota-mandated female representative reduces women's self-reported engagement with local politics (see Clayton, 2015).

An increasing number of studies also examine the quota impact on the quality of the elected politicians, proxied by different measures. Baltrunaite et al. (2014) find that a gender quota improved the average education of elected politicians in Italy, and Besley et al. (2017) provide similar evidence looking at a measure of labor market performance in Sweden. Bagues and Campa (2020), studying candidate quotas in Spain,

fail to find an improvement in the quality of politicians, measured by their education and electoral performance; however, their assessment is that the quota did not decrease quality either, contrary to the expectation of many quota opponents. However, Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) find that, in the context of seat reservations in rural India, quota candidates are less educated.

Finally, the evidence on whether gender quotas bring about policy change is scarce. Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) show that the reservation of the most important seat in Indian villages brought policy choices closer to women's preferences. In Spanish municipalities, Bagues and Campa (2020) fail to find significant increases in the share of "female expenditures" (issues women have been found to care more about than men, based on surveys) over two legislatures when candidate quotas were used.

Conclusion

Gender quotas are a popular policy tool used to close existing gender gaps in political empowerment, which are large in many countries in the FREE Network. A growing economics literature on the impacts of gender quotas helps assessing what objectives policy-makers may be pursuing when they adopt them, and under which conditions these objectives can be achieved. There are a number of lessons to be learned from this literature.

First, the design of the quota is crucial for it to achieve its primary objective, which is to increase women's presence in the targeted political positions. Placement mandates, for instance, are particularly important in the design of candidate quotas to avoid that women are strategically placed at the end of the ballot. Second, policy-



makers need to take the local context into account. Whether a candidate quota can generate spillovers to higher-level positions likely depends, for instance, on the degree of centralization of political parties; where party leaders are very powerful, we may be less likely to see an increase in the share of female leaders following the adoption of a candidate quota. Third, the crucial question when gender quotas successfully bring about policy change needs additional investigation. Different factors likely play a role, such as: the type of position targeted by the quota (legislative or executive, local or national, etc.); the extent of the increase in representation achieved; the magnitude of the gender difference in preferences; the type of decision-making process prevailing (majority voting or unanimity); how the selection of politicians is affected by the quota; and how women's influence on policy is measured. Studies that systematically vary some of these factors will improve our understanding in this area of research. Fourth, there is no overwhelming evidence of negative effects of gender quotas in a number of dimensions, at least over a medium-term horizon.

The case for adopting and testing different forms of gender quotas, perhaps in combination with additional measures, is therefore relatively strong. Overall, our assessment is that quotas will have to remain in policy-makers' toolbox for some time, if the worldwide effort to close the persisting gender gaps in political empowerment is to continue.

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