

FROGEE POLICY BRIEF 3

Insights from Latvia

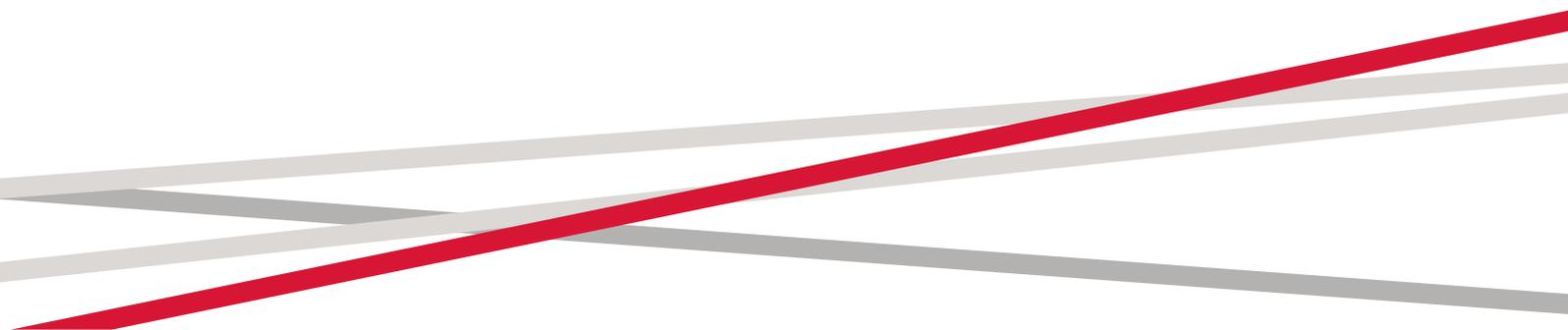
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Women in politics: why are they under-represented?

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Women's Political Empowerment in Latvia

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Abstract

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Women are generally under-represented in political offices worldwide, and their under-representation becomes larger in more senior positions. In this brief I review some recent academic literature in economics and political science on the likely causes of women's under-representation. Broadly speaking, the literature has divided such causes into "supply-side" and "demand-side" factors: the former include women's potentially lower willingness to run for political office, whereas the latter include voters' and party leaders' prejudices against women in politics. Understanding the underlying causes of women's under-representation in political institutions is crucial in order to design the most effective policies to address the existing gender gaps. In concluding I summarize some of the policies that have been proposed or used to empower women in politics and review the evidence on their effectiveness when available.

Women's Political Empowerment in Latvia

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In spite of favorable historical and institutional predispositions, political executives and assemblies in Latvia fail to reflect the gender diversity of the population they represent. In this brief, I sketch three broad accounts that contribute to the explanation of this outcome. They pertain to the persistence of a gender gap in political ambition, to obstacles hampering the nomination of women in electoral ballot lists, and to structural impediments within the Latvian party system after 1991. I conclude by recommending a set of policy measures targeting these obstacles, highlighting the absence of binding, legally anchored, commitments to the political empowerment of women.



Women in politics: why are they under-represented?

Women are generally under-represented in political offices worldwide, and their under-representation becomes larger in more senior positions. Of the four dimensions considered in the World Economic Forum's Gender Equality Index (namely, Economic Opportunity and Participation, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival and Political Empowerment), the dimension called Political Empowerment, which measures the extent to which women are represented in political office, records the poorest performance, with only 25% of an hypothetical 100% gap having been closed to date.

Importantly, although there is large variation across countries, gender inequality in political empowerment is documented in every region worldwide, including in those countries that are most socially and economically advanced. Sweden, for instance, while having a good record of women's representation in most institutions (women currently represent 47.5% of the Parliament members, 54.5% of the ministers, and about 43% of the municipal councillors), has never had a woman as Prime minister, and only one third of its mayors are female. Countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia have only closed 15% of an hypothetical 100% gender gap in political empowerment, according to the World Economic Forum, by far their worst performance among the four sub-indexes that compose the overall Gender Equality Index.

Given the persistent under-representation of women in political institutions, where important decisions that shape societies are taken, economists and political scientists, among others, are increasingly interested in understanding the causes of the gender gap in political

representation. In this brief I summarize some of the recent academic literature on this question, and I review some policies that may help closing the gender gaps in political representation.

Table 1. World Economic Forum Gender Equality Index. Regional Performance in 2020, by Sub-index

	Overall	Econ. Participation and Opportunity	Educational Attainment	Health and Survival	Political Empowerment
Western Europe	0.767	0.693	0.993	0.972	0.409
North America	0.729	0.756	1.000	0.975	0.184
Latin America and the Caribbean	0.721	0.642	0.996	0.979	0.269
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	0.715	0.732	0.998	0.979	0.150
East Asia and the Pacific	0.685	0.663	0.976	0.943	0.159
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.680	0.666	0.872	0.972	0.211
South Asia	0.661	0.365	0.943	0.947	0.387
Middle East and North Africa	0.611	0.425	0.950	0.969	0.102
Global	0.685	0.582	0.957	0.958	0.241

Note: The Global Gender Equality Index tracks countries' progress towards reaching gender equality in educational and health attainment as well as in economic and political life. The overall score is an unweighted average of these four sub-dimensions. A score of 1 corresponds to perfect equality; by contrast, the closer to 0 the score, the larger the gender gap in the respective dimension. The regional average for Eastern Europe and Central Asia is calculated based on the individual scores of the 26 countries. This Table is the authors' own rendering of data taken from the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2020 (WEF, 2019 p.22).

Why are women under-represented in political office?

Broadly speaking, three main reasons are most often explored, namely women's unwillingness to become politicians, voters' bias, and parties' bias.



Below I provide an overview of some of the work that has addressed each of these three factors.

Gender gaps in political ambition

Large-scale surveys have documented that women who, based on their professional and economic credentials, are potential political candidates, report lower ambition to occupy executive offices than comparable men (Fox and Lawless, 2004). The main reasons for the gender gap in ambition appear to be that (a) women are less encouraged to run for office than men and (b) women are less likely to believe that they are qualified for office than men.

Women's tendency to shy away from competition (Niederle and Vesterlund, 2007) may also play a role, since the political selection process is likely perceived as highly competitive. As Preece and Stoddard (2015) find by using two experiments, priming individuals to consider the competitive nature of politics lowers women's interest in running for political office, whereas it has no effect on the interest of men.

Women's willingness to advance in their political career can also be influenced by family and relational considerations. Recent work from Folke and Rickne (2020) shows that in Sweden female politicians who are promoted to mayor (i.e. the highest office in municipal politics) experience a significant increase in the likelihood of divorcing their partner, whereas this is not the case for men. If women face higher costs for their career achievements, as the evidence in Folke and Rickne (2020) suggests, they may be discouraged from pursuing such objectives.

While there is evidence that women may on average be less willing to advance to top positions than men, it is not clear how quantitatively relevant this factor is to account for the lack of women in power. The introduction of gender

quotas in candidate lists in different countries worldwide can be informative in this sense. If women's under-representation in electoral lists is mostly due to the lack of qualified female politicians, some electoral lists (in most cases representing specific political parties) may not be able to run due to the introduction of a quota, and the average "quality" of lists, measured by some relevant (to voters) characteristics of their members, would decrease. The literature finds no evidence of either of these two responses to quotas (see Baltrunaite et al., 2014, Besley et al., 2017, Bagues and Campa, 2020). On the contrary, in Italy (Baltrunaite et al., 2014) and Sweden (Besley et al., 2017) quotas appear to have improved the "quality" of the elected politicians.

Voters' bias

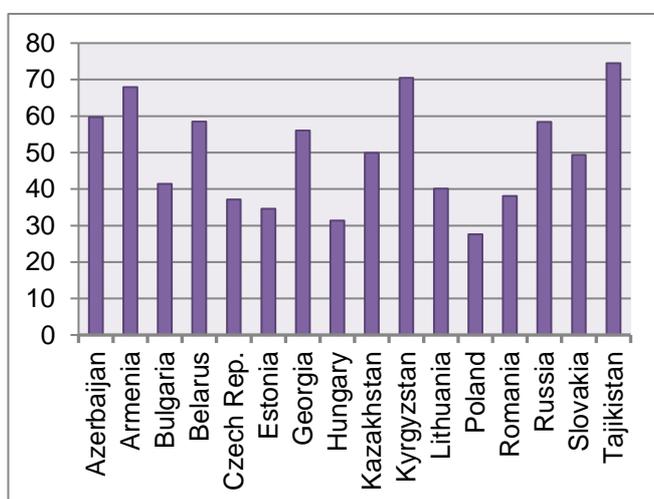
Krook (2018) observes that the existing work in political science regarding the importance of voters' bias in explaining women's underrepresentation in politics leads to ambivalent conclusions. Results in the most recent economics literature confirm this assessment. Barbanchon and Sauvagnat (2019) compare votes received by the same female candidate in French parliamentary elections across different polling stations within an electoral district and find that votes for women are lower in municipalities with more traditional gender-role attitudes. They interpret this pattern as evidence of voters' discrimination and conclude that voters' bias matters quantitatively in explaining women's under-representation among politicians. Conversely, Bagues and Campa (2020) find no evidence of voters bias against women, based on voters' reaction to the introduction of a gender quota for electoral lists in Spain. Specifically, they study how the quota impacts the electoral performance of lists that were more affected by the quota - i.e. that were forced to increase their share of female candidates by a larger extent, due to their lower level of feminization pre-quota. They



do not find evidence that such lists have worsened their relative electoral performance due to the quota. Put differently, there is no evidence that voters lower their electoral support of a list when its share of female candidates increases for exogenous reasons.

Survey data on voters' attitudes can also help in gauging the extent to which voters discriminate against women. Based on data from the latest wave of the World Value Survey (WVS, 2017-2020), in Western Europe typically less than 20% of survey respondents express agreement with the statement "Men make better political leaders than women do" (e.g. 5% in Sweden, 9% in Denmark and Germany, 12% in Finland and France, 19% in Italy; only in Greece the share of agreement is higher than 20%, at 26%). As shown in Figure 1, these percentages are substantially higher in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.).

Figure 1. Share of survey respondents who report to "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" with the statement "Men make better political leaders than women do".



Notes: Data are based on the latest wave of the World Value Survey, 2017-2020. The countries selected were either part of the former Soviet Union or under direct Soviet influence before 1990.

It bears noting, however, that answers to the WVS are not always informative about the extent to which voters' bias prevails in a country. Where the percentage of respondents who think that men make better political leaders than women is close

to or above 50%, as e.g. in Armenia, Georgia or Russia, voters' bias is likely to be an important factor. However, in countries with lower levels of agreement, such as for instance Poland, drawing conclusions is harder, since the WVS does not measure the share of respondents who think that *women make better political leaders than men do*.

Parties' bias

Party leaders, who often are key players in the selection of politicians, may prefer to promote male rather than female candidates. If they are aware of voters' bias against women, preferring male candidates is consistent with a votes-maximizing strategy. However, party leaders may also act as gate-keepers and hold women back even in absence of voters' bias. Esteve-Volart and Bagues (2012) find evidence of an agency problem between voters and parties by looking at Spanish elections. While parties tend to nominate women in worse positions on the ballot, there is no evidence that women attract fewer votes than men; moreover, when the competition is stiffer, women's position on the ballot improves. These two facts lead the authors to conclude that the disadvantage women face can likely be attributed to parties' rather than voters' bias.

When considering all these factors, it is also important to note that the systematic under-representation of women in political institutions is likely self-reinforcing, due to gendered group dynamics. In the laboratory, women in male-majority teams appear significantly less likely to put their name forward as team-leaders than women in female-majority teams; they anticipate, correctly, lower support from team members (see Born et al., 2019). Female mayors in Italy are significantly more likely to be removed by their municipal councils than their comparable male colleagues; importantly, this is especially true when the share of male councillors is particularly



large (Gagliarducci and Paserman, 2011). These studies suggest that, since the political arena has been historically male-dominated, gendered group dynamics can create vicious cycles of women's under-representation.

Which policies can be used to increase women's representation in political institutions?

Different policies can be considered to address the various factors accounting for women's under-representation in politics. In an attempt to address the "supply side" aspect of women's under-representation, various non-profit organizations have offered training programs aimed at providing women with knowledge, skills and networks to build political careers (see, for instance, NDI 2013). While reviewing the existing literature on these programs is beyond the scope of this brief, to the best of my knowledge there is little to no research-based evidence on the quantitative impact of training on women's advancements in politics. Non-profit organizations, political parties and researchers may fruitfully collaborate to implement and systematically test training programs.

Gender quotas are the most commonly used policy intervention, especially those regulating the composition of candidate lists, and they have been extensively studied; overall the literature suggests that quotas are more or less effective in empowering women depending on their design and the context where they are used (see Campa and Hauser, 2020 for a more comprehensive review of the economics literature on gender quotas and related policy implications). Given the nuances in the functioning of quotas, countries or regions that consider their adoption should consult with experts who know the ins and outs of

such policies and combine their expertise with local knowledge of the relevant context.

The structure and distribution of power within parties is likely crucial for improving women's political representation. Some scholars have devoted attention to the role of women's organizations within parties. Theoretically such organizations should favour the creation of networks and offer mentorship services, which are likely crucial to climb the career ladder in politics. In Sweden, a coalition of women from both the right and the left is credited for having pressed the Social Democrats' into adopting their internal zipper quota by threatening to form a feminist party (see Besley et al., 2017). Women's wings within political parties could play a similar role. Kantola (2018) notes that women's organizations seem to be currently deemed as outdated, at least in European parties; Childs and Kittilson (2016), on the other hand, find that their presence does not seem to harm women's promotion to executive roles within parties, a concern that has been associated with the existence of such organizations. In countries with public funding of political parties, specific funds could be directed to women's organizations within parties.

Folke and Rickne (2020) also note that, since women in top jobs appear to face more relational and family constraints than men, policies that improve the distribution of economic roles within couples could help address the under-representation of women in positions of political power; their observation underlines the crucial role of gender-role attitudes in affecting women's empowerment in any area of society. How can these attitudes change? An increasing amount of research is being devoted to answer this question. Campa and Serafinelli (2019), for instance, show that a politico-economic regime that puts emphasis on women's inclusion in the labor



market can change some of these attitudes. More research from different contexts and on specific policies will hopefully provide more guidance for policy makers on this important aspect, but the message from the existing research is that gender-role attitudes can be changed, and therefore policy-makers should devote attention to interventions that can influence the formation of such attitudes.

In many Western democracies the rate of progress in women’s access to top political positions has proven especially slow. This history of Western democracies and the existence of the self-reinforcing mechanisms described above can serve as a lesson for countries in transitions, where new political organizations and institutions are emerging. In absence of specific policies that address women’s under-representation at lower levels very early on, it would likely take a very long time before gender gaps are closed at higher levels of the political hierarchy.

In concluding, I observe that constant monitoring of the gender gaps in political institutions is important, even in presence of clear upward trends, since progress is rarely linear and therefore needs continuous nurturing.

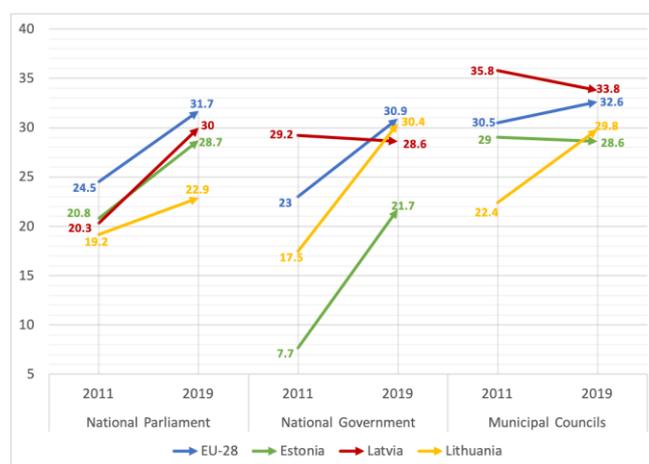
Women’s Political Empowerment in Latvia

Women in Latvian political institutions

The political engagement of Latvian women was tightly connected to the emergence of Latvia’s statehood and democracy. Latvian women were granted full political rights immediately after the proclamation of independence in 1918 – two years before the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, and decades before women in the UK (1928), France (1944), or Switzerland (1970) could exercise their franchise.

Six women – including the revered poet Elza Pliekšāne, better known by her pen name Aspazija – were represented in the Constitutional Assembly of 1920. These women were instrumental in the dissemination of liberal ideas, e.g. on equality in marriage and family relations, which in 1922 led to the adoption of one of the most progressive national constitutions of the time. Nonetheless, it was only in 1931 when the first woman was elected to the Latvian Parliament (the Saeima), although women were running for parliamentary positions before, on a handful of occasions even using female-only candidate lists.

Figure 1. Percentage of women in national parliament, national government, and municipal councils in the Baltic states and the EU average, 2011 and 2019



Source: European Institute for Gender Equality EIGE (2020).
Notes: The shares of women in national parliaments and national governments are the averaged quarterly figures for both 2011 and 2019. Municipal councils are representative assemblies (including the mayor) at the lowest administrative level of each country.

After the restoration of its independence, Latvia got its first female minister in 1994 (Indra Sāmīte), and in 1999, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga became the first woman to preside over a post-communist European state. In the Saeima, however, representation of women never exceeded 21% before 2018, when 31 of the 100 seats went to women in the 13th Saeima elections. Even though



the 2010s brought the gender balance in Latvia's legislative body to the highest level in the Baltic states, and almost on par with the EU average, this trend was counteracted by decreasing proportions of women in the national government and (albeit still above the EU average) in municipal councils (Figure 1). This pattern of a disparate evolution of female representativeness in national and local politics is unique to Latvia. It is less marked in Estonia (where the proportion of women in municipal councils has been stagnating between 2011 and 2019) and is entirely absent in Lithuania.

Obstacles to women's representation in Latvian politics

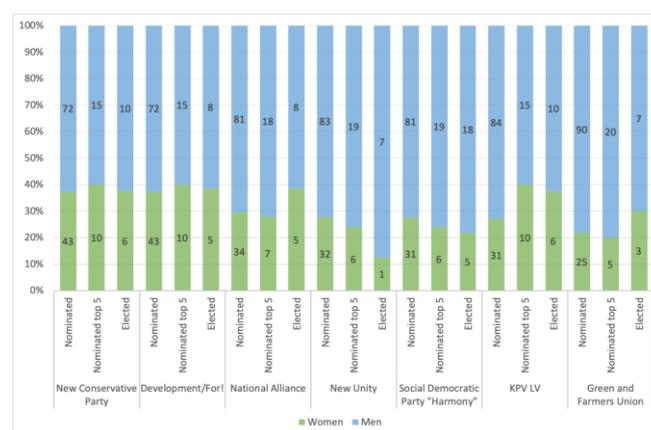
The low salience of gender equality on the Latvian political agenda, the lack of legislative candidate quotas at all administrative levels, and the absence of policy initiatives pushing for change from the government create favorable conditions for the unmitigated persistence of individual, party and institutional level obstacles to women's representation in politics.

Three obstacles are particularly worth mentioning. First, at the individual level, survey data indicates a gender gap in political ambition and willingness to pursue a political career. Latvian women express a much lower desire of power and dominance over people and resources than Latvian men (Rungule and Senkāne, 2018). Such evidence falls in line with the findings from experimental research on gender-specific attitudes about competition as a basis for success (Preece and Stoddard, 2005). Interestingly, the low appeal of power and dominance among Latvian women does not translate into political disaffection. Post-electoral polls in Latvia persistently show that women's turnout is higher than men's in national elections (CVK, 2018).

Second, Latvia's political parties are not exempt from the widely observed tendency to privilege male candidates on ballot lists. This privilege is

expressed both in terms of gender ratios within party lists and in terms of women's under-representation in the top positions of party lists (Figure 2). While in the 2018 Saeima elections, two elected parties nominated almost 40% of female candidates overall (over all five district lists), others had much lower proportions of female nominees (with the Green and Farmers Union having only 21% of female candidates). No party placed more than 10 women in the top five positions in all five district lists altogether. Again, the bottom-placed party was the Green and Farmers Union with only 5 top-listed women in its set of electoral lists. It is noteworthy, however, that for four out of seven major parties – Development/For!, National Alliance, KPV LV, and the Green and Farmers Union – the share of women elected to the 13th Saeima ended up being higher than the share of women nominated on the ballot lists.

Figure 2. Ratio of women and men in party lists for the 13th Saeima (2018) and among candidates elected



Source: Central Election Commission of Latvia (2018).

Notes: Latvia uses an open-list proportional system for the election of the 100 members of its parliament (the Saeima). Parties run separate candidate lists in five constituencies – Riga, Vidzeme, Latgale, Zemgale, and Kurzeme – and can field a maximum of 115 candidates overall. The plotted ratios include candidates in all five constituencies. Data labels indicate the ratio in absolute terms. Parties which did not meet the 5% electoral threshold are not displayed.



Third, there are reasons to believe that some barriers to women's empowerment are byproducts of the particular configuration of the Latvian party system since the restoration of independence. In sharp contrast to Western Europe, party competition in Latvia is not aligned along traditional lines of social and ideological conflict. Crucially, Latvia's post-1991 party configuration has not been affected by the "materialist" vs. "postmaterialist" conflict which, two decades earlier, had led to the emergence of environmentalist, cosmopolitan, and social-justice-oriented party profiles in Western Europe (Inglehart, 1977). Instead, Latvian parties emerged in early 1990s largely on the basis of clientelist networks or charismatic leaders (Römmele, 1999), resulting in a highly fragmented and volatile party landscape. Moreover, Latvia became the last post-communist state in the European Union to introduce state financing of parties in 2012 (Auers, 2015). These circumstances not only prevented the transformation of gender equality concerns into a matter of partisan competition; they also prevented the parties themselves from establishing a strong bureaucratic structure that could initiate, promote, or monitor the advancement of women in politics. Finally, a clientelist party structure, where nomination processes are closed and tend to happen within the – predominantly male – networks that are instrumental to the party's funding, makes it difficult for women to pursue a political career within a party.

Policy strategies

With its proportional representation (PR) system, which is generally regarded to be more supportive of women's political empowerment than majoritarian systems (Castles, 1981; Norris, 1985; Matland, 1998), Latvia is well-positioned to

consider targeted policy measures addressing the obstacles listed in the previous section.

Capacity development initiatives such as *training programs* for future female candidates, *recruitment initiatives* encouraging women to run for office, and *awareness-raising initiatives* in public education, seeking to introduce young women to the importance of women in political leadership, have proven effective tools to change mentalities and foster political ambitions among women (Norris and Krook, 2011). While the *Plan for the Promotion of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men for 2018-2020* (Latvian Government, 2018) mandates the Latvian Ministry of Welfare to offer ad hoc gender equality training to high-level officials and employees of certain public entities, it does not offer a binding legal basis for the aim of strengthening the political empowerment of women. Before large-scale capacity development policies can be envisioned in Latvia, a legal basis must be established that clearly states the objective of women's empowerment in politics and assigns the necessary competences and funding to government entities.

A *gender quota* for legislative candidates is a promising tool for addressing women's underrepresentation in party lists. However, as the political race for the 2018 Saeima clearly indicates, the application of a quota alone is unlikely to be sufficient to achieve gender-balanced electoral outcomes. Additional measures such as *placement mandates* – regulations for gender ordering in ballot lists, i.e. the "zipper rules" (alternation of male and female candidates) or with respect to top-placed candidate positions – might be necessary for enhancing the effectiveness of the quota (Corrêa and Chaves, 2020). This may be especially true in the presence of closed nomination mechanisms, typical for the Latvian



party system. Currently, only The Progressives, a small leftist party without parliamentary representation, has voluntarily adopted such a mechanism (a woman was placed first on each list in all Latvian constituencies). Finally, close attention should be paid to the growing gender gap in Latvian municipal councils. In the absence of a national policy strategy, as some evidence indicates, it might be sufficient to increase (e.g. using a quota) the proportion of women in the assemblies of some specific municipalities. This might then trigger a contagion “role model” effect in neighboring municipalities, gradually increasing the share of women in politics on the local level (Gilardi, 2015).

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