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Improving women's political representation beyond gender quotas

While gender gaps in politics have narrowed considerably in recent decades, large disparities remain in several countries, especially those where binding gender quota laws have not been adopted. What are alternative pathways for increasing women's political representation in these countries? We investigate one such pathway in the context of Turkey. A conservative dominant party, Erdogan's AKP, is often challenged in local elections by a Kurdish party that promotes gender equality in electoral lists and in society more generally. Exploiting variation in Kurdish party wins in municipal elections during 2009-2019, we find that the Kurdish party winning leads AKP to increase its share of female candidates by 25 to 30% in the next election. Our data suggests that AKP's response is primarily motivated by strategic considerations aimed at appealing to voters who may value gender-balanced representation. The implications of these findings extend beyond Turkey, suggesting that one party empowering women can help reduce gender gaps in lists across the board.

Pathways to gender equality in political participation

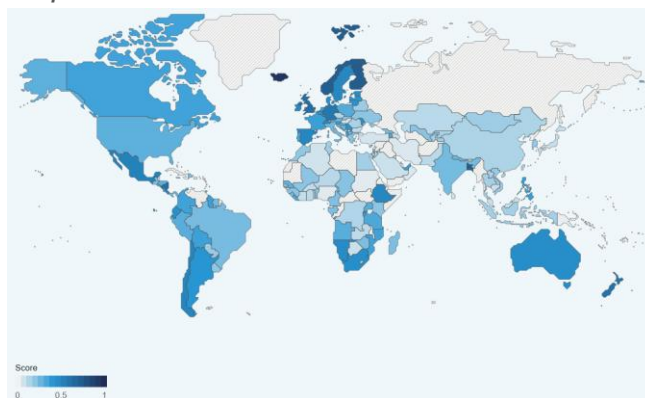
Across the world, women have historically been underrepresented in political institutions, but considerable progress has been made in recent decades. Legislated gender quotas are credited for having contributed significantly to such progress, especially in developing countries (Berevoescu and Ballington, 2021). Across different contexts, well-designed quotas have been shown to successfully increase the share of women in electoral lists and, although to a lesser extent, in legislative and leadership positions (see Campa and Hauser, 2020 for a review of this literature).

Research also suggests that the electoral system could influence women's political participation, with more women being elected under proportional rather than majoritarian systems (Profeta and Woodhouse, 2022) and, within proportional systems, through closed rather than open lists (Gonzalez-Eiras and Sanz, 2021). Moreover, recent findings suggest introducing term-limits as a tool to boost women's electoral prospects (Kansikas and Bagues, 2025).

However, despite the positive trends worldwide, large gender disparities in political representation persist in many countries. Some of the most entrenched inequalities are found in states governed by authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes promoting conservative values, where legal reforms to enhance gender equality are unlikely. For instance, the map in Figure 1, which assigns lighter shades of blue to countries where gender gaps in political empowerment are larger, shows that across Europe and Central Asia four of the five lowest scoring countries are authoritarian

or semi-authoritarian, namely Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Hungary and Turkey, which Freedom House ranks as "partly free" or "not free".

Figure 1. Gender gaps in political empowerment



Source: [World Economic Forum. Gender Gap Report 2025](#).

Note: The figure shows country scores on the World Economic Forum's Political Empowerment Index. Lighter shades of blue indicate a larger gender gap in political empowerment.

What are alternative pathways that may increase women's political participation in such contexts, where gender quotas and other representation-enhancing electoral reforms are unlikely to be introduced?

In [recent work](#) - Campa et al. (2025) - we study one such pathway in the case of Turkey, namely the emergence of a competitive, albeit not dominant, party that commits to gender equality in lists and beyond.

Women's political participation in Turkey

Despite early enfranchisement – municipal voting rights in 1930 and full suffrage in 1934 – women's political representation in Turkey remains low. Women are severely under-represented in Parliament at around 20% after the 2023 elections. Turkey is also one of the 24 countries worldwide where women's representation in local governance



is below 15% (World Economic Forum). The share of female mayors was less than 0.5 percent between 1930 and 2004 (Koyuncu and Sumbas, 2016), with a minor increase observed since 2005. During this period, the share of female candidates in electoral lists for the municipal council also increased by 6 p.p., and the share of female councillors increased by 5 p.p., but as of 2019, these shares were still severely low, at, respectively, 14 and 12%.

AKP versus Kurdish party

The under-representation of women in local governance masks stark differences between parties, especially between the ruling party, Erdogan' Justice and Development Party (AKP henceforth) and one of the main opposition parties in local elections, the Kurdish party, which ran in 37% of the elections held between 2009 and 2019 and won 19% of them.

AKP is ideologically conservative and with a religious base. During the 20 years in power, it passed no law to increase women's representation in politics, despite the vast gender gaps at all levels of government.

The Kurdish party instead stands out in the Turkish political landscape for its commitment to gender equality in many areas of society, including politics. For instance, currently the party pledges to enact a gender-mixed co-leadership system at the party level as well as a "zipper quota" in its electoral lists, and more generally advocates for a gender equal society "starting with the local governments" (see the party's [official website](#)). Both the mixed-leadership system and a version of the candidate quota have been in place for two decades.

As a result, the share of female candidates for the municipal council is much higher in electoral lists associated with the Kurdish party, at 21% on average over the period 2009-2019, as compared to AKP's 11%. The Kurdish party's share of female candidates is also remarkably high in comparison to the other major opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP henceforth), which averages 13% female representation in its local electoral lists. The higher feminisation of the Kurdish party's lists is reflected in the share of women elected: on average, only 6% of the councillors elected with AKP are women; this number goes up to 12% for CHP and jumps to 28% for the Kurdish party (see Figures 2 and 3).

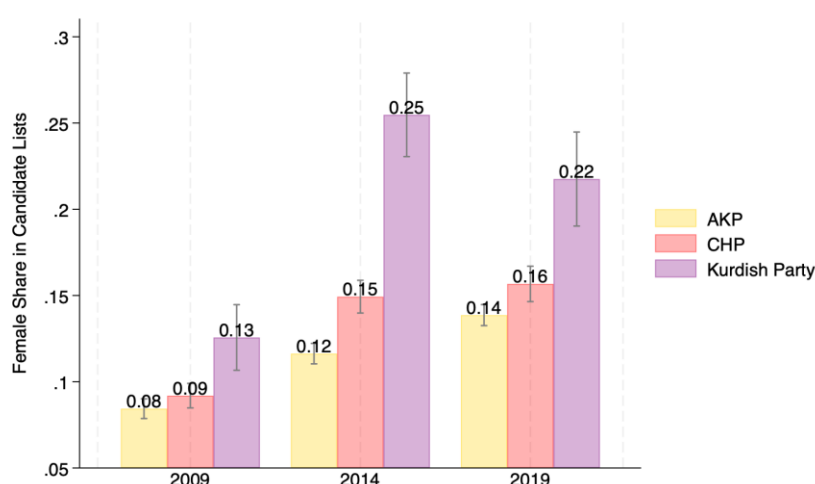
We also note that the Kurdish party tends to elect a much larger share of female mayors than its competitors. According to the High Election Council (YSK) Election Statistics, in the 2009, 2014, and 2019 elections, the share of female mayors elected by the Kurdish party was respectively 21, 30, and 45%, whereas AKP elected less than 1% of female mayors in 2009, and this percentage remained stable at 1% in the 2014 and 2019 elections.

The effect of a Kurdish party's win on AKP's behaviour

Against this background and given the recent improvement in the share of female candidates across all parties (see Figure 2), we ask whether a Kurdish party victory prompts AKP to improve the gender equality in its lists in subsequent elections. By studying this question, we hope to contribute to shedding light on the forces that might help close gender gaps in political representation in relatively traditional societies governed by



Figure 2. Female share in candidate lists in municipal elections in Turkey.



Source: Author's calculation based on own digitisation of data released by Turkey's Higher Election Council (YSK). Note: The figure shows the share of women in candidates' lists for the election of municipal councillors by party, focusing on the major party that governs at the central level (AKP) and its two main competitors at the local level (CHP and the Kurdish party).

Figure 3. Share of women elected as municipal councillors in Turkey, by party.



Source: Author's calculation based on own digitisation of data released by Turkey's Higher Election Council (YSK). Note: The figure shows the share of women elected as municipal councillors by party, focusing on the major party that governs at the central level (AKP) and its two main competitors at the local level (CHP and the Kurdish party).

authoritarian or semi-authoritarian governments, where the under-representation of women in political institutions is particularly severe and gender quotas are unlikely to be adopted.

Using a novel dataset covering municipal council elections in Turkey in 2009, 2014, and 2019 —

including candidates' gender —we exploit within-municipality variation in Kurdish party victories to identify their impact on AKP's female candidates' share. We find that a Kurdish party win leads to a 2.8 to 3.4 p.p. increase in AKP female share of candidates in the next election, representing a 25–



30% increase from a baseline of 11 p.p.; the estimate is robust across different econometric specifications, and we document that AKP lists were not on a differential trend in terms of share of female candidates in places where the Kurdish party wins - in other words, the increase in female candidates is only subsequent to the Kurdish party victory, strongly suggesting that it is indeed the result of AKP's response to the growing popularity of the Kurdish party, and not the product of a secular trend of growing women's representation. We also find that a win from another major opposition party, CHP, prompts smaller and only marginally statistically significant increases in female representation, suggesting that it is not just electoral competition that would force AKP to improve the selection of its candidates, but the Kurdish party's gender focus that matters.

Why does AKP respond to a Kurdish victory by increasing its share of female candidates? Its behaviour could be strategic – appealing to voters who appear to care about some form of gender balance in lists – or stem from learning through exposure to capable female councillors. To gauge the relative importance of these different explanations, we exploit a special feature of the Turkish electoral system, namely parties submitting, together with the "main" list of candidates to be selected by voters, a "special quota" list containing the candidates directly assigned to the municipal council by the party if it wins the plurality vote. Such a list is not very salient to voters, and often not visible to them. We find no increase in women on AKP's special lists after the Kurdish party wins, indicating the motive is likely an electoral strategy rather than internal reform.

Conclusion

Across the world, women have historically been underrepresented in political institutions. While gender gaps in political participation have narrowed considerably in recent decades, particularly due to the adoption of gender quotas, large disparities remain in many countries. Some of the most entrenched inequalities are found in states governed by authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes, where legal reforms to promote gender equality in politics are unlikely. Understanding alternative pathways for increasing women's political representation in these contexts is a pressing challenge. We investigate one such pathway in the case of Turkey.

Although the ruling party, AKP, has remained resistant to gender-based reforms, it has increasingly faced local-level competition from a Kurdish party that consistently champions gender equality. Leveraging a new dataset covering municipal council elections in 2009, 2014, and 2019, we find that when the Kurdish party wins a municipality, AKP increases the share of female candidates in its master list by approximately 25 to 30% in the subsequent election.

The implications of these findings extend beyond the Turkish case. In political systems where institutional reform is unlikely, competitive pressure from parties that prioritise gender equality can still drive changes in political behaviour. Even without quotas, such parties can shift norms and electoral expectations, thereby inducing rival parties to adopt more inclusive practices.



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