

Case Study: Latin America

Women, Political Parties and Electoral Systems in Latin America

Mala N. Htun

This case study analyses how political parties and electoral systems shape women's opportunities to gain access to power in Latin America. In the past 15 years, many of the region's parties have made significant efforts to promote women. Eleven countries in the region adopted quota laws for women's candidacies and a 12th, Colombia, has introduced them for senior positions in the executive branch. The influence of quotas is conditioned by electoral rules: the measure works best in countries with closed-list proportional representation (PR) electoral systems, placement mandates, and large electoral districts. Yet the weakness of the political parties and party systems in many countries, particularly in the Andean region, poses a threat to democratic consolidation and the livelihoods of women and other citizens.

As in the rest of the world, women have historically been seriously under-represented in elected office in Latin America. Their presence in political decision making has never equalled men's. Recognizing that this situation undermines democracy, political equality and justice, more and more people—including male politicians and opinion leaders—have endorsed measures to increase women's presence in power. Since 1991, 11 Latin American countries have adopted quota laws establishing minimum levels for women's participation as candidates in national elections. Although the results vary depending on the electoral rules and the enforcement of the rules, the trend towards quotas marks a watershed in public attitudes towards women in power and in official commitments to gender equality.

As a result of quotas, social and economic development, democratization and cultural changes, women's presence in power in Latin America has grown. From an average of 9 percent in 1990, by 2005 women's representation in the lower houses of the national parliaments of the region had increased to 17 percent. Women's share of seats in the senates grew from an average of 5 percent in 1990 to 13 percent in 2005. And, whereas women occupied 9 percent of ministerial posts in 1990, this

had increased to an average of 14 percent by 2005. A few countries have registered dramatic increases thanks to the successful application of quota rules. Nowhere, however, have women achieved parity in presence with men.

Table 9 shows that women's share of power, while quite high in some Latin American countries (as in the congresses of Argentina and Costa Rica and the cabinet of Colombia), is low in others (e.g. in the congresses of Guatemala and Honduras and the Mexican Cabinet). On average, women's opportunities to participate in parliament have improved, but gains have not been evenly distributed.

Table 9: Women in Power in Latin America in 2005: A Snapshot

Country	% Women in the Lower House (or unicameral parliament)	% Women in the Senate	No. of Women Ministers	% of Women Ministers
Argentina	34	33	1 of 11	9
Bolivia	19	15	1 of 15	7
Brazil	9	12	2 of 23	9
Chile	13	4	3 of 17	18
Colombia	12	9	5 of 13	38
Costa Rica	35	–	3 of 16	19
Cuba	36	–	6 of 38	16
Dominican Republic	17	6	3 of 20	15
Ecuador	16	–	2 of 15	13
El Salvador	11	–	2 of 12	17
Guatemala	8	–	2 of 13	15
Honduras	6	–	3 of 23	13
Mexico	23	16	0 of 19	0
Nicaragua	21	–	1 of 13	8
Panama	17	–	2 of 12	17
Paraguay	10	9	2 of 10	20
Peru	18	–	2 of 15	13
Uruguay	12	10	0 of 14	0
Venezuela	10	–	3 of 16	19
AVERAGE	17	13		14

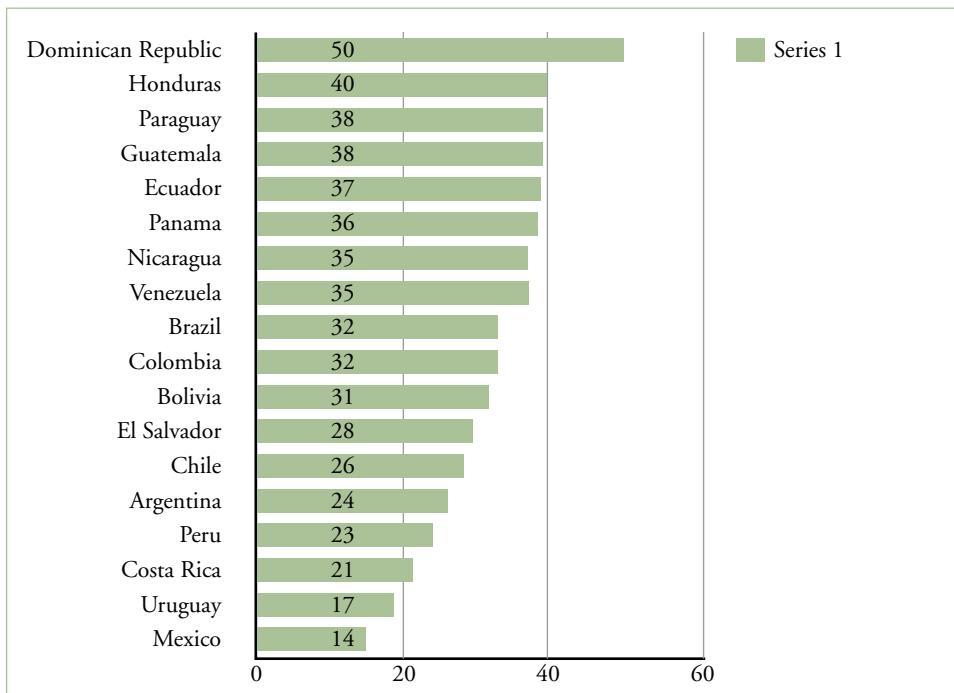
Sources: Data on ministerial positions are from national government web sites except for Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Uruguay and Venezuela, where the information was found at Georgetown University's Political Database of the Americas, available at <<http://www.georgetown.edu/pdba/>>. Data on national legislatures are from the Inter-Parliamentary Union, 'Women in National Parliaments: Situation as of 31 January 2005', <<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>>.

Public Attitudes to Women's Leadership

A survey from 2004 reveals significant differences between countries in attitudes towards men and women in power. Figure 4 shows the percentage of respondents who agreed with the statement '[M]en are better leaders than women'.

Figure 4: Public Attitudes to Women Leaders in Latin America, 2004

Percentage agreeing with the statement 'men are better leaders than women'.



Source: Latinobarómetro, 2004. 'Una década de mediciones' [A decade of measurements]. Informe Resumen. Santiago de Chile, 13 August 2004, <<http://www.latinobarometro.org>>.

These findings suggest that sexist views among the electorate are not holding women back in many countries, especially Mexico, Uruguay and Costa Rica. In the Dominican Republic, however, fully half of respondents are hostile to women's leadership. Yet there is no clear correlation between the survey results and actual numbers of women in power. As this suggests, some of the clues to explaining women's opportunities lie elsewhere. We should therefore investigate the effects of political institutions—parties and electoral systems—on women's candidacies.

Political Parties

Parties are the gatekeepers to women's advancement to power. To gain positions of leadership, women must work through parties that have the unique ability to field candidates for political office. Parties, however, have historically been highly gendered institutions that incorporated women on a different basis from men and in ways that impeded their access to leadership positions. In many Latin American countries, women still make up half of party members but rarely enjoy equal status with men on party executive boards or among candidates for popular elections. Women have joined 'women's wings' of parties that mobilized voters and supported male candidates by hosting meetings and fund-raisers. Unlike the male-dominated bureaus for peasants, labourers, students and so on, these women's bureaus were not derived from a class position or occupation that women could organize around to press their collective demands. Rather, women were recruited '*as women*, whose primary association as a group was with private life'.¹ Not surprisingly, women's representation in political leadership positions is low relative to their overall participation in political parties.

Since the early 1990s, however, many women's wings have reoriented themselves to serve not as support staff but as advocates of female leaders. In Mexico's Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN, National Action Party), for example, the women's wing has been transformed from a matronly organization into an effective base for promoting women's entry into mainstream leadership positions. In elections between 1997 and 2003, the PAN's National Secretariat for the Political Promotion of Women lobbied local and national party leaders to include women as candidates. As a result of their efforts, by 2003 the PAN, despite its right-wing ideology, had more female candidates than the country's two other major parties, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI, Institutional Revolutionary Party) and the Partido Revolucionario Democrático (PRD, Party of the Democratic Revolution).²

Scholars (including Richard Matland, in chapter 3 of this volume) have hypothesized that women's success depends on party organization and ideology. It is argued that women will enjoy greater opportunities in rule-oriented, bureaucratic parties than in unstructured or clientelistic parties.³ When a party has clear rules on the nomination of candidates, and these rules are respected, potential candidates can better understand the nomination process and hold party leaders accountable to the rules. Studies have also found that women tend to fare better in left parties whose ideology favours the representation of marginalized social groups and with whom feminist movements have closer ties.⁴ One multi-country study found that the electoral strength of left-wing parties was a powerful predictor of women's representation in power.⁵

Yet evidence from Latin America suggests no direct correlation between women's presence and party type. Their representation in the legislature in countries with institutionalized party politics and rule-oriented parties varies dramatically, from lows of 12 and 13 percent in Uruguay and Chile, respectively, to a high of 35 percent

in Costa Rica. Meanwhile, women's presence in the legislature in countries where parties are more personalistic and informal, and the party system is only weakly institutionalized, such as Bolivia and Peru (at 19 and 18 percent, respectively) is above the regional average of 17 percent.

Ironically, efforts to promote internal party democracy may thwart attempts at greater gender equity. Some parties in Latin America are adopting internal primaries to select candidates for general elections. This measure, which decentralizes power by taking the control of nominations out of the hands of party leaders, complicates efforts to enforce quota rules. Primaries also favour established candidates who have resources, most of whom tend to be men.⁶

What about the effects of party ideology? In the 1990s, it seemed that Latin America followed world trends: parties of the left, which advocated state intervention, social policy and participatory democracy, tended to get more women elected than parties of the right.⁷ By 2005, however, the tendency has changed. Women do not do so badly as one might expect in parties of the right relative to the total numbers of women legislators in each country. Women's share of seats in three of the region's major right-wing parties outperforms their total presence in the respective congresses. For example, women make up 29 percent of deputies from Mexico's right-wing PAN (44 out of 151); 16 percent of the deputies elected by Chile's rightist Renovación Nacional (RN, National Renewal) party (3 of 19); and 10 percent of deputies from Brazil's right-wing Partido da Frente Liberal (PFL, Liberal Front Party) (6 of 62).

A greater concern is the weakness of parties and low citizen identification with any party. Regional public opinion surveys conducted by the Latinobarómetro organization, based in Santiago de Chile, show that on average only about 18 percent of Latin Americans have confidence in political parties (which fare worse than parliament, the judiciary, the police, television, banks, the Church and other institutions).⁸ Crises in the party system go a long way towards explaining instability in Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela, civil violence in Colombia, and discontent with democracy in Peru. Advocates of women's representation must therefore struggle to strengthen political parties: as the main vehicle to aggregate citizen preferences and translate these into policy, as well as the single institutional route to power, parties are an indispensable component of democratic governance.

Women and Electoral Systems

Various studies have shown that electoral rules are important for women's chances of getting elected.

Countries that have PR tend to elect more women than countries with plurality/majority systems. Why? As Richard Matland argues in chapter 3, in PR systems (where seats are allocated to parties based on the percentage of the total vote they receive) parties have an incentive to 'balance' the ticket by including candidates with ties to a variety of social groups (such as women) and candidates who represent different party

factions and constituencies. In majoritarian systems, by contrast, the incentives are different. Parties tend to field those candidates who have a realistic chance of winning more votes than any other candidate. In most cases, party leaders feel that their top candidates are men.

Indeed, data for the year 2000 from 182 countries show that women made up an average of 15 percent of members of Congress in PR systems, 11 percent in mixed systems (in which part of the legislature is elected using PR and part using single-member districts), and 9 percent in plurality/majority systems.⁹

All Latin American countries use some version of PR (with the exception of Cuba, which does not have competitive elections), although four countries have mixed systems combining closed-list PR and single-member districts (see table 10). Among the List PR countries, seven use closed lists and five use open lists. Uruguay has a factional list system, in which votes are pooled at the party level, distributed proportionally to the factions, and then distributed to each faction's lists of candidates. In Colombia's personal list system, the vast majority of lists contain only a single candidate. Votes are pooled across these sub-party lists, not at the party level.¹⁰

Table 10: Electoral Systems in Latin America (for the Lower House of the Legislature or Unicameral Parliament)

Electoral System	Country
List PR: Closed-List	Argentina, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay
List PR: Factional closed list	Uruguay
List PR: Personal list	Colombia
List PR: Open-List	Brazil, Chile, Dominican Republic, Ecuador*, Peru
Mixed (List PR plus single-member districts)	Bolivia, Mexico, Panama, Venezuela

* In addition, 15 percent of Ecuador's Congress is elected from a single, national closed list.

Different sets of PR rules are associated with slightly different levels of women's representation. The mean level of women's representation for the lower house was 18 percent in the closed-list systems, 17 percent in the mixed systems, and 15 percent in the open-list systems. As this suggests, women do marginally better in closed-list and mixed systems than in open-list systems. To understand why, we need to examine the interaction between electoral rules and quota laws.

Quotas for Women

Between 1991 and 2000, 11 Latin American countries adopted quota laws establishing a minimum level of 20–40 percent for women's participation as candidates in

legislative elections. Venezuela, however, has since rescinded its quota law. A 12th country, Colombia, enacted a law requiring that women occupy 30 percent of appointed decision-making positions in the executive branch of government.

Have quotas actually helped more women get elected? On average, quotas boosted women's representation by ten percentage points, but the effects of quotas have varied significantly between countries (see table 11).

Table 11: The Results of Quotas in Latin America

Country	Legislative Body	% Women (before law)	% Women (after law)	Change (%)
Argentina	Chamber	6	34	+28
	Senate	3	33	+30
Bolivia	Chamber	11	19	+8
	Senate	4	15	+9
Brazil	Chamber	7	9	+2
Costa Rica	Unicameral	14	35	+21
Dominican Republic	Chamber	12	17	+5
Ecuador	Unicameral	4	16	+12
Mexico	Chamber	17	23	+6
	Senate	15	16	+1
Panama	Unicameral	8	17	+9
Paraguay	Chamber	3	10	+7
	Senate	11	9	-2
Peru	Unicameral	11	18	+7
Average		9	19	+10

The effectiveness of quotas depends largely on the nature of a country's electoral system. Quotas work best in closed-list PR systems where the law contains a placement mandate for women candidates. These mandates require parties to place women in high positions on the party list and not in ornamental slots where they stand no chance of being elected. Quotas also tend to work better in large multi-member electoral districts. In electoral districts with few members, only the party's top candidates—generally men—tend to get elected. When the district magnitude is larger, more of a party's candidates, including those in lower positions on the party list, will win seats.¹¹

These factors explain the success of quotas in the Argentine Chamber and Senate and the Costa Rican Congress. They also account for growth in Mexico, where 40 percent of the Congress is elected in large closed-list PR districts. All these three countries have quota laws with rules stipulating the placement of women candidates on the list.

However, many parties have complied with quotas in the most minimal way

possible without actually breaking the law. In Argentina, women must be placed in one of every three positions on the party list. Parties have tended to conform by including women in third positions, not first or second. In Costa Rica before 1999 there was no placement mandate, and parties tended to put women near the bottom of party lists. That year, however, the Supreme Court, in response to petitions from the national women's agency, issued a ruling declaring that parties must place women in positions from which they stand a realistic chance of getting elected. It reminded parties that such list spots should be easy to calculate given the average number of seats won by a party in each province in the past.¹² The ruling produced spectacular results: women's presence in Congress jumped from 14 to 35 percent after the 2002 elections.¹³

The details of the quota law are very important. Mexico's quota law, for example, technically does not apply in districts where candidates are selected through primary elections, but the Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE, Federal Electoral Institute) has offered no guidelines about what procedures count as legitimate primaries. Notwithstanding this potential loophole, women still made up more than 30 percent of candidates for the legislative elections in 2003.¹⁴ Brazil's experiences attest to the need to draft quota laws carefully. The law states that parties must reserve 30 percent of candidate slots for women, but does not require that parties actually fill these slots. Since parties may postulate 50 percent more candidates than seats being contested in a district, a party may, in practice, field a full slate without including any women. For example, if an electoral district elects 10 members to Congress, each party is permitted to postulate 15 candidates. The quota law requires that parties reserve four of these slots for women. If a party is unwilling to recruit women, it can put forward 11 male candidates and still not violate the law.¹⁵

These examples suggest that for quotas to work the law must be written in such a way as to avoid loopholes that permit parties to avoid nominating women or to comply with quotas merely by placing women in supplementary or 'decorative' positions on the ballot paper. In addition, activists need to be willing and able to mobilize to monitor implementation of the quota. In Argentina, parties began to comply with quotas only after activists repeatedly challenged non-compliant lists in court.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding women's gains in the legislatures of some countries, significant challenges remain. As the Latinobarómetro poll shows, sexist attitudes persist. Women have gained formal power in several countries, and have reached a critical mass in a few, but not everywhere. They make up at least half of political party members in many places but have not achieved parity with men in the party leaderships. In most countries, men control the most important congressional committees and informal networks of power.

What is more, even when women are present, they do not always act to promote a gender equality agenda. There is a fragile link between the descriptive representation of women (evidenced by their numbers) and the substantive promotion of their gender interests through the introduction of bills and amendments, lobbying, consciousness-raising, speeches and so on. Many observers have been disappointed that women in elected office do not do more to champion gender equality issues. After centuries of state sexism, such disappointment is understandable. On the other hand, perhaps it is unreasonable to expect that a group of newcomers could so quickly modify the logic of the political marketplace. It is one thing to put women in power. It is quite another to transform the way politicians behave.

Advancing women's right to participate in power, their civil rights and their equal opportunities is linked to the consolidation of democracy, to social development and to equitable economic growth. As long as the region's income gaps widen, many women will lack basic capabilities and remain excluded from eligibility pools for leadership. As long as millions of citizens are struggling to meet their basic needs, there will be limited political space to build coalitions around a women's rights agenda. And as long as state institutions suffer from problems of corruption, inefficiency and mismanagement, it will be difficult to implement new policies such as quota laws. The embrace by so many leaders of the principle of equal opportunity for women is a cause for celebration, but Latin America requires further economic, political and social transformations to translate this principle into practice.

Notes

- ¹ Friedman, Elisabeth, 2000. *Unfinished Transitions: Women and the Gendered Development of Democracy in Venezuela, 1936–1996*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, p. 96.
- ² Baldez, Lisa, 2004a. 'Obedecieron y cumplieron? The Impact of the Gender Quota Law in Mexico'. Paper presented at the meeting of the Latin American Studies Association, Las Vegas, 7–9 October 2004. Women made up 52 percent of the PAN's PR candidates, compared to 47 percent for the PRI and 42 percent for the PRD.
- ³ See also Caul, Miki, 1999. 'Women's Representation in Parliament: The Role of Political Parties'. *Party Politics*. Vol. 5, no. 1; and Norris, Pippa, 'Breaking the Barriers: Positive Discrimination Policies for Women', in Jyette Klausen and Charles S. Maier (eds). *Has Liberalism Failed Women?* (forthcoming).
- ⁴ Caul 1999, op. cit., p. 81.
- ⁵ Reynolds, Andrew, 1999. 'Women in the Legislatures and Executives of the World: Knocking at the Highest Glass Ceiling'. *World Politics*. Vol. 51, no. 4 (July), p. 569.
- ⁶ Baldez, Lisa, 2004b. 'Elected Bodies: The Gender Quota Law for Legislative Candidates in Mexico'. *Legislative Studies Quarterly*. Vol. XXIX, no. 2 (May), pp. 231–58.

- ⁷ Htun, Mala, 2001. 'Electoral Rules, Parties, and the Election of Women in Latin America'. Paper prepared for the 97th annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, 30 August–2 September.
- ⁸ Latinobarómetro, 2004. 'Una década de mediciones' [A decade of measurements]. Informe Resumen. Santiago de Chile, 13 August 2004, <<http://www.latinobarometro.org>> (accessed 25 October 2004).
- ⁹ Norris, Pippa, 2004. *Electoral Engineering: Voting Rules and Political Behavior*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- ¹⁰ Archer, Ronald P. and Matthew Shugart, 1997. 'The Unrealized Potential of Presidential Dominance in Colombia', in Scott Mainwaring and Matthew Shugart (eds). *Presidentialism and Democracy in Latin America*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 133–4.
- ¹¹ Htun, Mala and Mark Jones, 2002. 'Engendering the Right to Participate in Decisionmaking: Electoral Quotas and Women's Leadership in Latin America', in Nikki Craske and Maxine Molyneux (eds). *Gender and the Politics of Rights and Democracy in Latin America*. London: Palgrave, pp. 39–40.
- ¹² García, Ana Isabel, 2003. 'Putting the Mandate into Practice: Legal Reform in Costa Rica'. Paper presented at the International IDEA Workshop, Lima, Peru, 23–24 February.
- ¹³ Jones, Mark, 1998. 'Gender Quotas, Electoral Laws, and the Election of Women: Lessons from the Argentine Provinces', *Comparative Political Studies*. Vol. 31, no. 1 (February), pp. 3–21; and Jones, Mark, 2004. 'Quota Legislation and the Election of Women: Learning from the Costa Rican Experience'. *Journal of Politics*. Vol. 66, no. 4 (November), pp. 1203–23.
- ¹⁴ Baldez 2004b, op. cit.
- ¹⁵ Htun, Mala, 2001. 'Women's Leadership in Latin America: Trends and Challenges', in *Politics Matters: A Dialogue of Women Political Leaders*. Washington, DC: Inter-American Dialogue, p. 16.