

Women's Legislative Recruitment: no simple explanation, no single panacea

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PR: neither necessary nor sufficient

It is a widely held view that the first-past-the-post electoral system disadvantages women and that electoral reform would improve the representation of women in the UK Parliament. In Westminster elections party candidates are selected constituency by constituency – too often women are selected for the party's less winnable seats. Only on election-day does it become obvious that the House of Commons is once again over-represented by men. Proportional representation is, however, *neither a necessary nor sufficient condition* for improving the political representation of women. This is not to say that a more proportional system is not desirable but the surest and most immediate way to guarantee a fairer representation of women in elected bodies is to apply quota rules, irrespective of the electoral system.

Evidence from the UK and around the world clearly demonstrates that operating under a more proportional electoral system is no guarantor of women's political representation. Whilst at first glance the Scottish Parliament appears to be an example of electoral reform working in women's favour, when we look more closely at the figures we see that the high numbers of women returned to the Scottish parliament can be largely attributed to the Labour party's use of twinning in its single member constituencies rather than high numbers of women in the party lists. We don't wish to argue that electoral reform is of no benefit to women, moments of constitutional change often provide a window where women can disturb the political order and demand space in the new institutional arrangements. But the choice of PR is important. In OSCE countries with a party list system of PR there are on average 4-6% more women in lower house. List systems can make initiatives to improve the representation of women easier to implement, and harder to ignore. Certainly in a closed list system parties can 'zip' men and women candidates, alternating them on the party list, and therefore greatly increasing the likelihood of women getting elected and not just selected. Should a party place all of their women candidates at the bottom of the list the distribution of seat winnability by sex of candidate would be plain for all to see.

Global Trends: the case for quotas

When it comes to the global league table of women's representation there are some surprising countries in the top ten. In fact if you ask undergraduate students of politics to rank order countries by the percentage of women in the legislature fail they invariably fail to get the right order.

Top 10 Percentage of women in lower or single house in rank order

1. Rwanda 56.3%
2. Andorra 50.0%
3. Cuba 45.2%
4. Sweden 44.7%
5. Seychelles 43.8%
6. Finland 42.5%

7. South Africa 42.3%
8. Netherlands 40.7%
9. Nicaragua 40.2%
10. Iceland 39.7%

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Their expectations – and no doubt others – is that established democracies will do best. In fact this is rarely the case. The UK House of Commons does particularly poorly, with just over 20% women MPs, coming in at an embarrassing 49th place. It is beaten by other European countries, including Spain, Portugal and Belgium even as it is ahead of France and the US. The scale of women's under-representation in the UK Parliament is often met with surprise; perhaps because women MPs often wearing bright jackets are highly visible against a background of grey suits, and perhaps too because they are used strategically by party leaders - 'doughnutting' the Prime Minister on the Parliamentary benches, or on the campaign trail, or at press conferences.

Around the world the single most important factor related to higher levels of women's representation is the use of quotas. About half of the top 20 OSCE countries registering sharpest growth in women's representation have used legal quotas; of the bottom twenty none had such constitutional requirements. Sure, there has been overall improvement in women's representation over time, but there is no simple linear trend, with stagnation in some countries and regions, for example, Scandinavia, and fall back in others, such as those countries that make up the post-soviet space, and in Scotland and Wales. In other cases there has been substantial and steady growth (Switzerland, Spain, Austria) and in yet others sudden rises (Belgium and the Netherlands). In all this, there is no clear unambiguous relationship between electoral system and the proportion of women in the lower house.

The way forward for the UK: time for quotas too

A change in the electoral system in the UK might well have pushed Britain up in the international ranking by a few places. But if we want to see sizeable changes then sex quotas are a better - and arguably post the AV referendum, the easier - choice. Recall that in 1997 there was a big jump in the number of women MPs: the figure doubled overnight from 60 to 120. This had nothing to do with the electoral system per se. Instead, it was the Labour party's use of a quota system, in the form of all-women-shortlists, that accounts for the rise, and explains too their continuing higher levels of women's representation. In the 2011 parliament they still have more women MPs than all the other parties added together. Quotas are, for sure, by no means a simple panacea, they need to be well designed and robustly implemented or some parties will find ways to circumvent them, but they provide nonetheless the most effective means to improve the political representation of women. As one of the recommendations of the 2008-10 Speaker's Conference made clear, it is time for Parliament to consider legislative quotas for women.