



“No Quota Fever in Europe?”

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A paper presented at the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)/CEE Network for Gender Issues Conference

The Implementation of Quotas: European Experiences

Budapest, Hungary, 22–23 October 2004

‘Quota Fever’

In recent years, electoral gender quotas have been introduced in an amazing number of countries all over the world (see www.quotaproject.org). Today, one may even talk about a ‘quota fever’. In Africa, the Balkans, Latin America and South Asia many different types of quota regimes have been introduced very recently.

A dramatic change has taken place in the global ranking of countries based on their level of women’s political representation. As a result of quota provisions, Argentina, Costa Rica, Mozambique, Rwanda and South Africa are now placed very high in the world league of the Inter-Parliamentary Union.¹ The five Nordic states, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, which for a long time were virtually alone at the top of the table, are now being challenged. Although controversial, the electoral gender quota has proven to be a highly effective instrument for achieving equality, provided that it is implemented properly.

In Europe, however, quotas are rather unpopular, except in the Balkans. In Western Europe, quotas mainly take the form of voluntary party quotas, Belgium and France being the exceptions. In Central and Eastern Europe very few parties have approved quota regulations and no legal gender quota regulations for parliament are in place.

Analysis of quota discourse reveals that resistance to quotas in Western Europe is connected primarily to the belief that quotas are in conflict with the concept of liberal democracy and the principle of merit (‘let the best man (sic!) win’).

The present myth about Soviet quotas

In Central and Eastern Europe as well as in Russia, strong resistance to quota provisions is, also based on the understanding that quota regulations are a phenomenon of the Soviet past, an example of that period’s ‘forced emancipation’. It is often heard that under communism a quota system of 30 percent for women was installed. But is this true, or does present resistance to quota systems today partly rests on a myth of the past? The fact is that political institutions during the Soviet period were dominated by men, both in the East and in the West. Moreover, the systems of

nomination and election varied considerably between the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the level of women’s representation was not stable, especially during the 1970s and 1980s.

Under communism, the level of representation of women in the powerful central committees of the communist parties was negligible, but somewhat higher in the mostly symbolic parliaments. A few figures may help to dispel the myth about a stable 30 percent quota provision for women. In the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party, women’s representation (as full members) was eight percent in 1981, increasing to 13 percent only in 1986, an historic high.² Women held 31 percent of seats in the Supreme Soviet of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), and as many as 48 percent of seats in the local Soviets in 1975.³ Women’s representation in the parliaments of many Eastern European countries increased during the 1970s and 1980s, but the system of selection or appointment differed from country to country.⁴ Research from the 1980s does not indicate a stable and widespread 30 percent quota for women. Maybe it is time to rewrite the script in many countries.

Regional differences

Although in 2004 only 15.6 percent of members of parliament (MPs) around the world are women, significant differences exist between regions. The Nordic countries have the highest number of women parliamentarians (39.7 percent), while the Arab States have the lowest (six percent). Sub-Saharan Africa comes close to the world average (14.6 percent). However, there are considerable variations among nations within each region.

Table 1: Women In National Parliaments (Lower Houses)—Regional Differences

Nordic countries	39.7%
Americas	18.5%
Europe/member states of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) (excluding the Nordic countries)	16.3%
Asia	15.1%
Sub-Saharan Africa	14.6%
Pacific	11.1%
Arab States	6.0%

Source: <http://www.ipu.org>, 30 September 2004

The Need for Cross-country Analyses

Throughout the world women’s organizations and political parties are searching for methods to end male dominance in politics. In principle, most people and governments support the idea of gender balance in political life. Today, introducing quota provisions in politics is considered a legitimate equal opportunity measure in many countries, even if resistance is still strong in others.

This calls for a new research agenda. What happens when electoral gender quotas are introduced in political environments as dissimilar as those of Argentina, France, India, Pakistan, South Africa, Sweden and Uganda? Under what conditions do quotas contribute to the empowerment of women? When do gender quotas lead to unintended negative consequences like stigmatization and marginalization? These are crucial questions that need to be addressed by feminist researchers, as well as by international institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Having gathered data on the employment of quotas globally, it is time to formulate this new research agenda to compare these different quota systems.⁵ Such cross-national research should examine the discourse that is taking place, decision-making processes, implementation processes and the effects of quotas.

While electoral statistics can provide information on the number of women elected, many countries, unfortunately, do not have data on the sex of nominated candidates, which must be obtained through other channels, such as the parties themselves. Quotas should also be assessed from a qualitative perspective, however, that is, the intended and the unintended ramifications, such as the real empowerment of women or specific groups of women versus the possibility of stigmatization and glass ceilings that prevent the number of women exceeding the quota requirement.

With some exceptions, until now, research on quotas has primarily been limited to one country. It is essential to widen the analysis and to conduct research that compares quota discourse and implementation processes and results under different electoral systems, different political cultures and different gender regimes. Existing single-country studies seem to come up with quite different conclusions on the ability of quota systems to empower women. These differences, though, might be due to the chosen approach rather than to actual differences between nations.

The theoretical foundation of quota demands

Analyses of quota discourse reveal interesting variations among countries and regions. Quotas are highly controversial in some countries, whereas quota proposals have been passed with only little discussion in others. Yet the debate is often confused, and is only comprehensible if hidden assumptions about women and the position of women are scrutinized. Hence some consider quotas to be a form of *discrimination and a violation of the principle of fairness*, while others view them as *compensation for structural barriers that prevent fair competition*. Quotas are sometimes perceived as violating other principles like fairness, competence and individualism. Yet quotas are also seen as an efficient way of attaining 'real' equality, that is, 'equality of results'.⁶

If we take the actual exclusion of women as the starting point, that is, if we recognize that many barriers exist that prevent women from entering the realm of politics, then quotas are not viewed as discriminating (towards men), but, instead, as compensation for all of the obstacles that women face. When all of these impediments are removed, quotas will no longer be necessary, it is argued. In this respect, quotas are a temporary measure. It may take decades, though, before all social, cultural and political barriers preventing equal representation of women are eradicated. Today, the very idea of linear progressive development towards gender equality is challenged.

The gatekeepers to the political scene used to be the political parties, because of their control over the nomination process. The role of voters is often not as decisive as one would think. Who will be elected is frequently decided by the nomination committees of the political parties—they select the candidates and place them in good or bad constituencies (in terms of likelihood of election). Prior to the polls, the political parties usually know which seats are 'safe'. In all systems, it is important to examine who actually exercises control over the nomination process. In countries with a high level of women's representation, women's organizations have consistently asked: who controls the nomination process? In the Scandinavian countries women's organizations shifted from the more vague call for 'more women in politics' to the demand for 50 percent of seats on nomination committees and within the party leadership.

The decision as to whether or not to introduce a quota is increasingly influenced by the recommendations of international organizations and by developments in different national contexts. Electoral gender quotas are being introduced today in nations where women have been almost entirely excluded from politics, as well as in states with a long history of female involvement in the

labour market and in political life, such as the countries of Scandinavia. In the Scandinavian countries, electoral quotas were not introduced in the latter until the 1980s, when women's parliamentary representation already exceeded 25 percent.

The introduction of effective quota systems represents a shift in approach, from 'equal opportunity' to 'equality of results'. However, since most quotas systems specify the number of women and men to be presented to voters on electoral lists, and not the gender distribution following the election, one might prefer to see electoral gender quotas as an example of 'real equal opportunity'. Women and men have an equal chance to present themselves to the voters and in open-list proportional representation (PR) systems, as well as in majority systems, voters have the option of voting for a female or male candidate. In general, a quota system represents a break with the widespread gradualism of equality policies. Viewed from this perspective, the Scandinavian countries can no longer be considered a model for ensuring equal political representation around the globe.

Why Scandinavia is no longer the model

For many years, feminist organizations worldwide have viewed the five Nordic countries as a model for achieving equality for women. A key factor has been the very high level of representation of women in parliament and on the local councils, especially since the 1970s.

Table 2: Percentage Of Women In Scandinavian Parliaments Today

Sweden	45.3% (2002)
Denmark	38.0% (2001)
Finland	37.5% (2002)
Norway	36.4% (2001)
Iceland	30.2% (2003)

How did women in Scandinavia come this far? What can we learn from the Scandinavian experience? As Nordic researchers we have tried to answer these questions by pointing to structural changes within these countries, such as secularization, the strength of social-democratic parties and the development of an extended welfare state, women's entrance into the labour market in large numbers in the 1960s, the educational boom of the 1960s, and the type of electoral system (PR). Strategic factors are also seen as important, especially the various approaches employed by women's organizations to raise the level of women's political representation.

The international research community has paid considerable attention to the results of Nordic research. The extraordinarily high rate of women's representation in the region since the 1970s, by international standards, has sometimes been attributed to the introduction of quotas.⁷ However, this is not an accurate assessment: quotas were not introduced until women had already acquired around 25 percent of the seats in parliament. Women politicians then used this new power to consolidate the position of women in general by working for the introduction of quotas in their respective political parties. Quotas were never introduced by law in the Nordic countries, only as a result of internal party decisions. And not all Nordic political parties use quotas—those that do are mostly to be found in the centre and on the left of the political spectrum. The few Danish parties that introduced quotas abolished them after just a few years. Finally, the Swedish principle of 'every second a women' is not even considered a quota system by the general public, even if, in fact, it is a radical quota system, demanding and, in most cases, leading to a 50 percent gender balance.

The Scandinavian experience cannot be considered a model for the twenty-first century *because it took 80 years to get that far. Today, the women of the world are not willing to wait that long.* Electoral quotas are a symbol of the impatience of modern women. A very good example is South

Africa, where the introduction of quotas in the 1994 election (the first poll to be held following the demise of apartheid) by the African National Congress (ANC) resulted in women's representation in the new democracy reaching 27 percent.⁸

Different Quota Systems

The electoral quota for women may be constitutional (like in Burkina Faso, Nepal, the Philippines and Uganda), legislative (as in many parts of Latin America, as well as, for example, in Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Sudan) or it may take the form of voluntary party quota. In some countries, including Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Germany, Italy, Norway and Sweden, a number of political parties have some type of quota. In many others, though, only one or two parties have opted to use quotas. However, if the leading party in a country employs a quota, such as the ANC in South Africa, this may have a significant impact on the overall rate of women's representation. Yet most of the world's political parties do not use any kind of quota at all.

Even if constitutional amendments and new electoral laws providing for gender quotas may seem more commanding, it is not at all evident that these methods are more efficient than political party quotas when it comes to implementation. It all depends on the actual rules and the possible sanctions for non-compliance, as well as on the general opportunities that exist for quotas within a country. As for nomination rules, the crucial issue is whether there are any rules governing the rank order of candidates on the list. Are the nominated women placed in a position with a real chance of election? 'Reserved seats' are a different kind of quota, whereby a specific number of seats are set aside for women—as in Uganda, where a number of regional seats are reserved for women. The differences between the various systems should not be exaggerated. In a closed list system, quotas, in reality, determine which of the candidates will be elected, but the number of seats to be awarded to each party is still down to the electorate.

In some countries quotas pertain to minorities based on regional, ethnic, linguistic or religious cleavages. Almost all political systems utilize some kind of geographical quota to ensure a minimum level of representation for a densely-populated area, such as an island. That type of quota is usually not considered to be as controversial as a gender quota.

Quotas work differently under different electoral systems. Quotas are most easily introduced in proportional representation (PR) systems. But even in a PR system, because of the few elected candidates, small parties and parties in small constituencies experience difficulties in implementing quotas without interference by the central party organization.

Quotas may be introduced in democratic political systems, as well as in systems with limited democratic freedoms, or even in non-democratic or authoritarian political systems.

Gender-neutral quota provisions?

Most quotas aim to increase women's representation, since, typically, the problem to be addressed is the under-representation of women. This is particularly relevant as women usually make up 50 percent of the population or more. An electoral gender quota regulation may, for example, require that at least 40 percent of the candidates on an electoral list are women. A minimum requirement for women implies a maximum number of men.

Some quota systems, however, are constructed on a gender-neutral basis, which establishes a maximum for both genders. The requirement may be that neither gender occupies more than 60 percent and no less than 40 percent of seats.

A 50–50 quota is, by nature, gender-neutral. It also sets a maximum for the representation of women, which a minimum female requirement does not.

A 'double quota' not only calls for a certain proportion of women on an electoral list, but it also prevents women candidates from being placed at the bottom of the list with little chance of election. Argentina and Belgium are examples of countries with a legal requirement for double quotas.

The Troublesome Matter of Quota Implementation

Quotas have often stimulated vehement political debate. To date, research on quotas has tended to concentrate on these debates and on the decision-making process. While these discursive controversies are an essential part of the Stockholm University research project, emphasis is also being placed on the frequently neglected and troublesome matter of quota implementation and on the consequences of introducing quotas. From single-country studies we know, for instance, that the introduction of a requirement demanding a minimum of 30 percent of each gender on an electoral list does not automatically result in women acquiring 30 percent of seats. Thus, by comparing the use of quotas in many similar (and different) political systems, it is possible to determine whether quotas are an equitable policy measure, contributing to the stated goal of equal political citizenship for women.

An unclear debate and lack of legitimacy with regard to the claim often leads to problems at the implementation stage. In a survey of political parties in the Nordic countries, and of women's organizations in the same parties, the Norwegian Labour Party reported that it takes three elections to implement a quota. Why? Because the party is not prepared to throw out an incumbent male parliamentarian in order to include a woman.

The results of past single-country studies vary to a considerable extent: the partial failure of the attempt to introduce women's shortlists in a single majority electoral system, like that of England, which nevertheless produced some positive results;⁹ the success of the Scottish 'twinning system'; often 'minimalist' compliance with the rules by political parties in Latin America, resulting in small and uneven gains in women's representation, with Argentina and Costa Rica serving as outstanding positive examples;¹⁰ and the somewhat stigmatic consequences of the system of reserved seats for women in Uganda.¹¹

The 30 percent quota provision for local councils in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan amounts to a sort of revolution in the gender regime in this area. Research has shown, though, that the quota system requires that women's organizations develop capacity-building programmes for nominated and elected women candidates. If quotas are to lead to the empowerment of women, elected women must have the capacity to fulfil their new responsibilities; especially in a strong patriarchal society, capacity-building for women politicians is essential. At the same time, we may conclude that properly implemented quotas might contribute to a more gender balanced society.

International 'Translation'

A new international discourse on gender balance in institutional politics is an important factor behind the recent introduction of quotas all over the world. Today we see male-dominated parliaments passing quota laws. However, the fact that some countries have opened up to quotas, while others have not, and the fact that *specific types* of quota systems seem to manifest themselves in regional clusters, all point to the need for contextual-based research on how this international discourse are translated in order to make it applicable in different individual and regional contexts. The women's movement appears to have a crucial role to play in this process.

Endnotes

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