



Can political affirmative action for women reduce gender bias?

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Reservation policies, by giving voters the ability to observe the effectiveness of women leaders, might pave the way for improving women's access to political office and reducing statistical discrimination. This column summarises India's experience with quotas for women in public office.



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While women have the legal right to equal participation in politics in almost every country around the world, they remain vastly underrepresented in local and national politics. As of July 2006, women accounted for only 17% of parliamentarians worldwide, and a woman headed the government in only seven countries (UNICEF, 2007). These numbers vary dramatically by region. In 2004, the highest share of female parliamentarians was found in the Nordic countries (39.7%), while the lowest was in the Arab States (6%).¹

Can public policy alter this? Over a hundred countries around the world have introduced some sort of affirmative action policies for women in public office (Dahlerup, 2006). Many European countries, in particular, [have such policies](#), although usually, the only requirement is that women make up half of the *candidates*. A study of France (Frechette, Maniquet and Morelli, 2007) suggested such policies may not help women gain seats (today, there are only 18% of women in the national assembly in France). In contrast, Rwanda, where a 30% gender quota has been mandated since 2003, has just become the first country in 2008 where female parliamentarians make up the majority of the legislative assembly.

How might quotas work?

One reason to expect quotas to have a long-term impact on the electoral outcomes for women is that they force voters to observe women in political leadership positions. If women, on average, perform better than anticipated by voters, then voters will be more willing to elect women candidates in future elections, even in the absence of quotas.

Work in social psychology (mainly based on laboratory experiments in the US) suggests that group stereotypes affect individual perceptions of the effectiveness of women as leaders (Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993; Eagly and Karau, 2002). In the field of politics, it would suggest that pre-existing social norms that associate leadership with men may make it harder for women to enter the political arena. The lack of exposure to female leaders would, in turn, perpetuate biased perceptions of female leader effectiveness. Regardless of competence, if women leaders are presumed to be ineffective, their chance of successfully participating in politics is slim.

Overall, little is known about the long-run impact of quota on women's future electoral successes. This is an important question, since reservation policies are keenly debated in many countries. Showing that quotas durably level the political playing field would provide a strong argument in favour of such laws. Alternatively, if quotas were shown to provoke a backlash amongst voter and thus limit females' electoral chances, the wisdom of such laws would be in doubt.

There is already evidence that female leaders make different policy choices once in office, specifically ones that better reflect women's preferences (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004). But how do voters and the pool of potential female candidates respond to seeing women in office?

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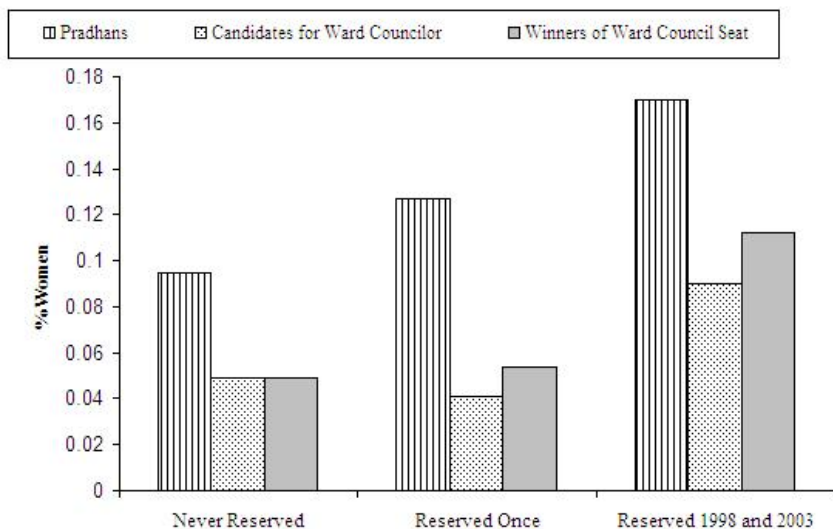
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An example: Mandated reservation in India

Our recent study provides evidence on this issue by examining mandated reservation in village councils in India, focusing on the state of West Bengal. Political reservation for positions of village councillor and chief village councillor was introduced in this state in 1998 for women and members of two disadvantaged groups – Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. In the case of women, one-third of village councillor positions and chief village councillor (Pradhan) positions are reserved for women. Which councillor positions within a village council or Gram Panchayat (GP) and which Pradhan positions across GPs in a district are reserved for a woman is randomly determined every election. Some GP were reserved once, twice, or never.

We collected data on who was elected at GP heads in five districts of West Bengal and who was elected as GP ward member in one district of West Bengal, Birbhum. The May 2008 election witnessed dramatic gains for women, particularly in GPs where the Pradhan position had been reserved for women in both 1998 and 2003. Relative to other GPs, the proportion of female candidates in double reserved GPs increased by 3.7 percentage points and the proportion of women elected as ward member more than doubled (10.7% compared to 4.9%). The proportion of women elected as Pradhan increased from less than 10% to almost 18%.

Figure 1: 2008 Election Outcome



Could this reflect changing voter attitudes, and, in particular, a reduction of bias against female leaders? One indication that something like that may be going on is that, compared to male leaders, women leaders in GP reserved for the first time receive low ratings, but this difference completely goes away when we compare men leaders to women leaders in GP reserved for the second time.

Perhaps voters are getting used to the idea that a woman can be as good a leader as a man. However, this evolution could also reflect the fact that women are becoming better at playing the political game. The new generation of women may be selected differently, or they may have learned how to get credit for their work (we find that, objectively speaking, their work is just as good).

To tease this out, we asked villagers to rate a speech delivered by a leader during a village meeting. In the speech, the leader responded to a villager’s query about public good investments by stating that the village council had limited funds and the villagers would need to also contribute. Half of the villagers randomly heard a female voice deliver the speech and the other half randomly heard a male voice. We also gave each villager a vignette about leader decision-making. The vignette described how the leader had to choose between investing in drinking water or irrigation. Here, we randomised the gender of the leader, by varying the name of the leader depicted in the vignette, and the leader’s final decision.

There is strong evidence of gender bias against female leaders in India. Villagers who have never been exposed to a female leader due to the reservation policy evaluate the hypothetical leader significantly worse when the leader is randomly described as a woman. However, villagers, particularly men, who had observed at least one female leader as a result of the quota system showed no evidence of bias

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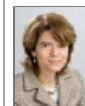
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against female leaders. If anything, male villagers in these areas rated the hypothetical female leader higher than the identical male leader.

Thus, mandated exposure to female leaders does help villagers understand that women can be competent leaders. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it does not change deep-seated social norms: when asked what they feel about leaders in general, villagers still much prefer male leaders to female leaders, even after being exposed to reservation. Unconscious distaste for female leaders (measured with implicit association tests, a battery of tests developed by psychologists to measure such biases) does not show improvement in this dimension as well.

However, the electoral results suggest that, when they finally have to vote, citizens understand that competence matters. After seeing women in politics, they realise that they are indeed competent.

What does this mean for the future?

Reservation policies, by giving voters the ability to observe the effectiveness of women leaders, can pave the way for improving women's access to political office and reducing statistical discrimination.

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Footnotes

1 Julie Ballington and Francesca Binda, [The Implementation of Quotas: The European Experiences](#), 2005.

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