

Political Power and Women's Representation in Latin America

Overview

The number of women elected to national legislatures around the world has grown significantly over the past thirty years. Today, the percentage of women in national legislatures worldwide is 18%, and some countries where only a handful of women used to win legislative elections now have women comprising 30-40% of their national legislatures. A substantial number of these countries are in the developing world, particularly Latin America and Africa. The influx of women into politics has the potential to bring new issues to the policy agenda, change the way legislatures operate, and increase citizen confidence in representative democracy. Yet, the extent to which this is happening and the reasons why women's election has led to more change in some countries than others is unclear.

In this book, I articulate a theory of women's representation arguing that women are gaining voice, but not power, in politics. I argue that gender-friendly electoral rules, such as gender quotas and proportional electoral systems, help women win space in the legislative arena, which in turn brings women's equality issues to the political agenda and fosters constituent support for representative democracy. At the same time, however, I argue that women's presence in legislatures is not translating into real political power. Women in office face an environment where the male majority has incentives to protect its long-standing dominance and political power. Because of this, women will not gain access to important political resources, such as prestigious committee assignments, leadership posts, or sponsorship of diverse types of legislation. Instead, they will be marginalized into less important legislative activities and work on traditionally "feminine" policy issues. I contend that this marginalization will be worse in political settings where electoral rules encourage party-centered rather than personalistic legislative behavior. In party-centered systems, party leaders who are usually male have substantial influence over the distribution of legislative resources making it easier for them to sideline women. Overall, I assert that women are increasingly present in politics, but equality is incomplete because institutional obstacles hinder women's attainment of real political power.

This argument about women's representation is applicable to a wide range of political settings, but in this book, I examine it with an extensive set of original data from Latin American legislatures. A focus on Latin America is important for three reasons. First, it extends the study of women's representation to new democracies in the developing world that have received considerably less attention than the developed democracies of the U.S. and Western Europe. This shows that even in poorer and newer democracies, women are entering politics (sometimes in larger numbers than in the developed world) but are struggling with similar challenges once in government. This underscores the need for theories of women's representation that encompass developed and developing regions.

Second, very little research has examined the nature of women's representation in Latin America despite the fact that the region has undergone significant developments in gender equality in recent years. Third, Latin American countries offer diversity in the number of women in legislative office and electoral institutions, two key dimensions of the theory of women's representation, providing a strong test of the theory that is generalizable beyond the region's borders. This study has important implications for those studying women and politics in Latin America as well as outside of the region.

I organize this book into four parts. The introduction articulates the theory of women's representation in detail. Part I focuses on the election of women in Latin America and presents a

statistical analysis of the institutional and socioeconomic factors that explain the varying numbers of women in national legislatures using aggregate data from elections in all eighteen Latin American democracies from their transition to democracy through 2007. Part II examines the way that legislators do the job of representing with in-depth analyses of how gender affects legislators' issue attitudes, bill sponsorship, cosponsorship, bill passage patterns, committee assignments, leadership positions, and home style activities in three countries – Argentina, Colombia, and Costa Rica. I use data that I collected through fieldwork in the three countries. Specifically, the analyses draw on a bill dataset with over 16,000 bills sponsored by male and female legislators in Colombia and Costa Rica between 1994 and 2002 and in Argentina in 1995 and 1999; a committee dataset with the committee memberships, committee leaderships, and chamber leadership posts held by all legislators elected between 1974 and 2006 in Colombia and Costa Rica and 1983-2001 in Argentina; a dataset of 292 legislators' responses to an original survey that I designed for this project and conducted in each congress in 2001-2002; and personal interviews with 21 female representatives in the three countries. Part III returns the focus of the book to the entire region of Latin America and presents a multilevel statistical analysis of the effect that gender quotas, the number of women in office, and the passage of women-friendly policies have on the electorate's views of government using Latin Barometer survey data from 1996-2006.

Target Audience

The primary audience for this monograph is academics, particularly in political science, though the interdisciplinary nature of women and gender studies means that it will also be of interest to scholars studying women and gender issues in women's studies, history, sociology, international studies, and Latin American studies. The book's theory of women's representation should interest scholars working on gender, representation, elections, legislative politics, and mass behavior both in Comparative and American politics. The empirical approach uses quantitative tests with qualitative support making the book methodologically rigorous but accessible to a wide audience.

A secondary audience is advanced undergraduate and graduate students. The paucity of literature on women, politics, and Latin America means that this book fills an important void for upper-division, special topics, or graduate courses on women and politics, comparative politics, political institutions, and Latin American politics. I plan to use the book in my own upper division, undergraduate course on women and politics and in an upcoming graduate course on political institutions.

The book will also be relevant to the large community of international organizations that devote attention to issues of women and politics, such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union, International IDEA, and the myriad of U.N. agencies that focus on gender issues. It will also be of use to scholars, universities, non-governmental organizations, and governmental agencies in Latin America that emphasize women and politics in the region. I already have connections with several of these groups. I recently worked with UNICEF on a commissioned background paper for their 2007 State of the World's Children Report and with the Inter-American Dialogue on their 2008 Report on Women in Political Leadership in the Americas. These highly regarded and well-known organizations, and others like them, will be an important audience for this book.

Related Books

The impetus for this book comes from a theoretical void in the literature on women's representation and the absence of empirical research on women's representation in Latin America. Theoretically, the literature lacks a comprehensive theory that incorporates the election of women (Lawless and Fox 2005; Kittilson 2006; Sanbonmatsu 2006; Krook 2009), what women do in office (Thomas 1994; Reingold 2000; Swers 2002; Saint-Germain and Metoyer 2008), and how the electorate feels about gender equality (Inglehart and Norris 2003). Existing research studies these topics as largely distinct from one another, which leads to an incomplete picture of women's representation. This has led to diverse, and sometimes contradictory, conclusions about women's representation, and no clear explanation for why women's representation varies across political settings.

Empirically, very little research focuses on women and political institutions in Latin America. Traditionally, research on women and politics in Latin America has focused on women in politics *outside* of the state through women's movements (Bayard de Volo 2001; Baldez 2002; Waylen 2007). Less research on Latin America, however, examines gender and politics *inside* the state, and most of it focuses on women's policies rather than the roles that female legislators play in the political process (Htun 2003; Macaulay 2006; Marx 2007).

Two books that do examine female legislators are Elsa Chaney's *Supermadre* (1979) and Michelle Saint-Germain and Cynthia Chavez Metoyer's *Women Legislators in Central America* (2008). Both of these books make important contributions to our understanding of elected women in Latin American government. However, they differ from my book in three crucial ways. First, they both focus only on women. They do not compare women to men in the political arena making it difficult to know whether women bring anything new to the political arena or represent differently than men. Second, most of their data is qualitative and drawn from secondary sources or interviews that they conducted with women in the region. Finally, they focus on different countries and different time periods. Chaney's study was of Peru and Chile in the 1960's and Saint-Germain and Metoyer focus on Central American countries in the 1990's.

In contrast to existing literature, this book offers a comprehensive theory of women's representation that brings together the election of women, their work as representatives, and the effects of these things on society's view of representative democracy. It provides an institutional explanation for why women's election and its consequences often vary across countries. It tests this theory empirically using qualitative and quantitative data on female and male legislators in Latin America region-wide and in three countries that have previously received little attention. In doing so, it fills a void in the existing literature on women and politics in Latin America and around the world.

Author's Motivation

My primary research interests are gender, politics, electoral institutions, and Latin America. Over the past five years, I have published several articles on women's representation dealing with an array of topics including gender and voting in the U.S. Congress, the election of women to national legislatures, and role of gender inside legislatures of Latin America. These articles have appeared in journals such as *The Journal of Politics*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *Electoral Studies*, and *Legislative Studies Quarterly*. This work also has won several awards. My doctoral dissertation, "Legislative Representation in Latin America," won the 2004 Best Dissertation Award from the American Political Science Association's Women and Politics

Research Section. An article published in *The Journal of Politics*, “An Integrated Model of Women’s Representation,” won the journal’s Best Paper Award for articles it published in 2005. To support writing this book, I received a 2008 Summer Research Fellowship from the University of Missouri and a 2008 Visiting Fellowship at the Kellogg Institute at the University of Notre Dame.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1: Introduction: A Theory Women’s Political Representation

The growing number of women winning legislative seats around the world augurs important questions about the causes and consequences of women’s representation. In the introduction to the book, I argue that we can best understand the election of women by building a comprehensive theory of women’s representation. I articulate the details of the theoretical model that motivates this book and then describe the current status of women in Latin American politics explaining why Latin America provides an excellent test of this theory. I conclude with an overview of the contributions this book makes to existing literature.

Part I: Descriptive Representation

Chapter 2: Electing Women in Latin America

The increasing numbers of women in Latin American legislatures and the wide variation across countries spur initial questions of why do more women get elected today than thirty years ago and why are more women elected in some countries than others? I present a statistical analysis that uses data on all eighteen Latin American democracies from 1974 (or the year of democratic transition) through 2007 and show that gender quotas and more proportional electoral rules are key explanations for varying gender representativeness in Latin American legislatures.

Chapter 3: Who Wins? Social Backgrounds, Paths to Power, and Political Ambitions

Who are the women winning legislative office in Latin America? Are they less qualified, do they emerge from non-traditional backgrounds, and are they less politically ambitious than men? I use descriptive statistics from the original survey of legislators in Argentina, Colombia, and Costa Rica to show that female and male representatives have very similar social backgrounds, paths to power, and political ambition in all three countries. Women in Latin America are competing for and winning election on their own merits.

Part II: Substantive Representation

Chapter 4: Preferences and Priorities: Gender and the Political Attitudes of Legislators

The political preferences that legislators bring to the legislative arena drive their legislative work. Using the survey of legislators in Argentina, Colombia, and Costa Rica, I show that female representatives, more than male legislators, believe that they have a responsibility to represent women, and they place higher priority on women’s equality issues than men do. At the same time, female legislators’ extra attention to women and women’s issues does not detract from the importance they place on other issues and constituencies in any of the three countries. Male and female representatives elected to office in Latin America have very similar political attitudes.

Chapter 5: Making Policy: Bill Sponsorship, Cosponsorship, and Bill Passage

Policymaking is one of the most important aspects of representation. I examine the types of bills that legislators initiate, cosponsor, and push through to passage and show that legislator gender affects the types of bills legislators sponsor and pass differently in Argentina, Colombia, and Costa Rica. In all three countries, female legislators are more likely to sponsor, cosponsor, and pass gender inequality bills, and in Colombia, women are just as likely as men to focus on all other issues. In Argentina and Costa Rica, however, female legislators are more likely than male legislators to sponsor, cosponsor, and pass issues traditionally considered to be “women’s domain” issues, such as children and family, education, and health bills, while they are less likely to focus on “men’s domain” issues, such as economic, fiscal affairs, and agriculture. Women substantively represent women by placing greater priority on women’s issues in all three countries, but in systems that encourage legislative responsiveness to party leaders rather than constituents, women do not have the same influence over the policymaking process as men do.

Chapter 6: Taking Charge: Leadership and Committees

Legislators also represent by taking on leadership posts in the legislature and sitting on committees. In this chapter, I present descriptive statistics on the chamber leadership posts that women have held in Argentina, Colombia, and Costa Rica over the past thirty years showing the paucity of women in leadership. Then, I analyze committee assignments showing that male and female legislators sit on the same types of committees as do men in Colombia but sit on different types of committees in Argentina and Costa. Finally, I show that women are significantly less likely to serve as committee leaders in all three countries. Women are getting elected to legislatures, but they are not making their way into chamber or committee leadership posts, and in some settings, they are not gaining access to the full spectrum of committees in the chamber.

Chapter 7: Working in the District: Home Style

While much of a representative’s job centers on policy and takes place inside congress, representatives also participate in activities centered around their electoral district that are aimed at securing support for their political future, often referred to as a legislator’s “home style.” Using data from the survey of legislators, I compare the amount of time that male and female legislators spend in their district (allocation of resources), their constituency service (presentation of self), and frequency with which they seek publicity of that work by making public presentations or speaking with the media (explaining activity). In Argentina, Colombia, and Costa Rica, I find that gender matters for activities specifically on behalf of female constituents or women’s groups, but has little effect on other forms of home style.

Part III: Symbolic Representation

Chapter 8: Evoking Support for the Political System

In this chapter, I return to a large, cross-national study of Latin American countries to examine whether the use of gender quotas, having more women in legislatures, and passing women-friendly policies evokes greater support for government in the electorate. I present a statistical analysis using survey data from the Latin Barometer and show that having more women in office generates feelings of greater confidence in the legislature, more trust in the government, more positive evaluations of how well political leaders are running the country, and perceptions of less political corruption. The use of gender quotas and the passage of women’s equality policies, however, have little effect on the electorate’s view of the political system.

Chapter 9: Conclusion – Incomplete Equality for Women in Latin American Politics

This study reveals a picture of incomplete equality in women's representation. In this chapter, I summarize the findings from Latin America in detail. I then examine possible explanations for different patterns of women's substantive representation arguing that the results most strongly support the theory that electoral rules provide incentives for male party leaders to marginalize women. I discuss the relevance of the theoretical model of women's representation for scholars studying other regions of the world and highlight the implications of the Latin American findings for women and politics other regions. I conclude by speculating on what the findings mean for representative democracy.

References for Related Books

- Baldez, Lisa. 2002. *Why Women Protest: Women's Movements in Chile*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bayard de Volo, Lorraine. 2001. *Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs: Gender Identity Politics in Nicaragua, 1979-1999*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Chaney, Elsa M. 1979. *Supermadre: Women in Politics in Latin America*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Htun, Mala. 2003. *Sex and the state: abortion, divorce, and the family under Latin American dictatorships and democracies*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Inglehart, Ronald, and Pippa Norris. 2003. *Rising Tide: Gender Equality and Cultural Change around the World*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kittilson, Miki. 2006. *Challenging Parties, Changing Parliaments*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Krook, Mona Lena. 2009. *Quotas for Women in Politics: Gender and Candidate Selection Reform Worldwide*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lawless, Jennifer L., and Richard L. Fox. 2005. *It Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Macaulay, Fiona. 2006. *Gender Politics in Brazil and Chile: The Role of Parties in National and Local Policymaking*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Marx, Jutta. 2007. *Las Legisladoras: Cupos de Género y Política en Argentina y Brasil*. Buenos Aires: Instituto Di Tella.
- Reingold, Beth. 2000. *Representing Women: Sex, Gender, and Legislative Behavior in Arizona and California*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Saint-Germain, Michelle A., and Cynthia Chavez Metoyer. 2008. *Women Legislators in Central America: Politics, Democracy, and Policy*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Sanbonmatsu, Kira. 2006. *Where Women Run: Gender and Party in the American States*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Swers, Michele L. 2002. *The Difference Women Make: the Policy Impact of Women in Congress*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Thomas, Sue. 1994. *How Women Legislate*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Waylen, Georgina. 2007. *Engendering Transitions: Women's Mobilization, Institutions, and Gender Outcomes*. New York: Oxford University Press.