



LIBRARY of PARLIAMENT
BIBLIOTHÈQUE du PARLEMENT

BACKGROUND PAPER



Electoral Systems and Women's Representation

Publication No. 2016-30-E
5 July 2016

Erin Virgint

Legal and Social Affairs Division
Parliamentary Information and Research Service

Library of Parliament ***Background Papers*** provide in-depth studies of policy issues. They feature historical background, current information and references, and many anticipate the emergence of the issues they examine. They are prepared by the Parliamentary Information and Research Service, which carries out research for and provides information and analysis to parliamentarians and Senate and House of Commons committees and parliamentary associations in an objective, impartial manner.

© Library of Parliament, Ottawa, Canada, 2016

Electoral Systems and Women's Representation
(Background Paper)

Publication No. 2016-30-E

Ce document est également publié en français.

CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION.....	1
2	A GLOBAL SNAPSHOT OF WOMEN IN PARLIAMENT.....	1
3	UNDERSTANDING UNDER-REPRESENTATION.....	2
4	ELECTORAL SYSTEMS AND WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION.....	3
4.1	Plurality or Majority Systems.....	4
4.2	Proportional Representation Systems.....	5
4.3	Mixed Electoral Systems.....	6
5	QUOTAS AND WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION.....	7
5.1	Gender Quotas.....	7
5.2	Types of Gender Quotas.....	7
5.3	Constitutional Quotas in Rwanda.....	8
6	CONCLUSION.....	9

ELECTORAL SYSTEMS AND WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION

1 INTRODUCTION

Because women represent roughly 50% of the population, the presence of women legislators is essential to encouraging citizen engagement and building a sustainable representative democracy. In addition, according to the United Nations Development Programme and UN Women, when women participate in elections as candidates – and as voters – decisions better reflect the electorate, and democracy is strengthened.¹

This paper explores electoral systems and women's representation in legislatures. Electoral systems are one factor among many that may impact women's political representation in legislatures. In and of themselves, electoral systems cannot be understood as vehicles to ensure or increase women's representation, as the social, cultural and political realities of each jurisdiction affect women's representation under different electoral systems in vastly different ways. The goal of this paper is not to address all of these factors, but simply to highlight some of the key features of plurality or majority, proportional representation and mixed electoral systems and how they may affect the election of women in selected jurisdictions. In this paper, we also discuss different gender quota systems used around the world and their effects on some countries.

2 A GLOBAL SNAPSHOT OF WOMEN IN PARLIAMENT

UN Women notes, "The percentage of women in national legislatures has become a standard measure of a country's achievements in women's political participation."² According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), women currently comprise 22.6% of all parliamentarians worldwide.³ Rwanda's lower legislative house ranks first in the world for women's representation among its legislators at 63.8%. Canada ranks 62nd, with 26.0% of the seats in the House of Commons held by women.⁴

As for regions, the Nordic countries (Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark and Iceland) far surpass all other regions of the world in percentage of women legislators in national lower or single legislatures: at 41.1%, it has the highest average percentage. The Americas rank second, with an average of 27.7%, followed by Europe (excluding Nordic countries) with 24.3%, Sub-Saharan Africa with 23.1%, Asia with 19.2%, Arab states with 18.0% and Pacific states with 13.5%.⁵

Table 1 – The 10 Countries with the Greatest Representation of Women in the Lower House, June 2016

Rank and Country	Number of Women Elected/ Total Number of Seats	Proportion of Women Legislators (%)	Type of Electoral System
1. Rwanda	51/80	63.8	Proportional Representation
2. Bolivia	69/130	53.1	Mixed
3. Cuba	299/612	48.9	Plurality/Majority
4. Seychelles	14/32	43.8	Mixed
5. Sweden	152/349	43.6	Proportional Representation
6. Senegal	64/150	42.7	Mixed
7. Mexico	211/498	42.4	Mixed
8. South Africa	168/400	42.1	Proportional Representation
9. Ecuador	57/137	41.6	Proportional Representation
10. Finland	83/200	41.5	Proportional Representation

Source: Table prepared by the author using data obtained from the Inter-Parliamentary Union, "World Classification," [Women in national parliaments](#), based on information provided by national parliaments as of 1 June 2016.

3 UNDERSTANDING UNDER-REPRESENTATION

According to a 2014 report by the IPU, the top five factors that deter women from entering politics globally are these:

- domestic responsibilities;
- prevailing cultural attitudes regarding the roles of women in society;
- lack of support from family;
- lack of confidence; and
- lack of finance.⁶

In Canada, women running for office are only slightly less likely than men to be elected, and there is evidence to suggest that Canadian voters do not actively discriminate against female candidates.⁷ While there are a number of theories as to why women are under-represented in Parliament, the party nomination stage is the most commonly cited political hurdle.⁸

Nomination procedures vary considerably among Canada's federal political parties and evolve from election to election. Some of the federal parties have very few formal nomination rules, while others have formal nomination processes that must be followed by every riding association.⁹ It has been suggested that formal procedures promote women candidacies, because candidate search committees are encouraged to seek out candidates from historically under-represented groups.¹⁰

A 2004 report on electoral reform by the Law Commission of Canada notes that the first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system, the system used in Canada, contributes to the under-representation of women. It suggests that because of the

winner-takes-all nature of the FPTP system, political parties attempt to maximize their chances of success by running the “safest” candidates. This discourages political parties from selecting “non-traditional” candidates, namely women and members of minority groups.¹¹ The Law Commission suggests that, consequently, women are not readily nominated, particularly in ridings that parties view as “winnable.”¹²

Research published in *Electoral Studies* in 2013 supported this assertion. The study examined the number of women candidates who ran in the 2008 and 2011 federal elections and found that over 60% of women candidates ran in ridings that were another party’s stronghold. Additionally, the study concluded that men are more likely than women to be candidates in ridings where they have a reasonable or very good chance of winning.¹³

Other reasons for low political representation of women in Canada are the lack of legislative measures and the lack of formal actions taken by political parties aimed at increasing the number of women elected, such as quotas or targets. A 2015 *Canadian Parliamentary Review* article notes that more than 100 countries around the world have adopted some form of gender quota (discussed in further detail in section 5 of this paper) to increase women’s representation, whereas in Canada, no official measures are in place.¹⁴ Instead, steps to address gender parity are taken on a voluntary basis by political parties. For example, the New Democratic Party’s constitution provides for gender parity among the party’s highest-ranking officers, which includes the leader, president, vice-presidents, treasurer and national director.¹⁵

Some parties have established special funds to help support and encourage women as candidates. For instance, the Liberal Party of Canada has put in place the Judy LaMarsh Fund, named after the first Liberal woman appointed to Cabinet (in 1963), and the New Democratic Party has the Agnes Macphail Fund.¹⁶ Both of these funds provide female candidates with financial and organizational assistance, training, counselling and other support.

While some federal parties have announced gender-based targets for candidates,¹⁷ it cannot be said that any Canadian political party has adopted a formal gender quota or that there are any legislative mechanisms in place to increase women’s political participation. As will be discussed in greater detail in section 5 of this paper, political parties in many jurisdictions, such as Sweden, Norway, Germany and South Africa, have established formal internal gender quotas to ensure that a greater number of women from their parties are ultimately elected.

4 ELECTORAL SYSTEMS AND WOMEN’S REPRESENTATION

How citizens vote and how candidates are elected are defining features of the different electoral systems used around the world. Many experts contend that electoral systems are the primary factor influencing the electoral prospects of women.¹⁸ It is commonly held that reforms to the electoral system may help bolster the representation of women in parliament.¹⁹

Some studies suggest, however, that the effect of electoral laws on women's representation is less significant than is often claimed. A 2013 article in *Comparative Political Studies* notes that electoral laws may have different effects in different times and places and therefore, generalizations about the impact of specific electoral systems on women's representation should be avoided.²⁰ The article further states that there is a risk in viewing electoral reform as a stand-alone solution for increasing women's representation, because this solution ignores the important social and cultural realities that have long prevented women from participating in electoral politics at the same level as men.²¹

4.1 PLURALITY OR MAJORITY SYSTEMS

In plurality or majority electoral systems, the winning candidate is the individual who garners the most votes in an electoral district. There are various types of systems that fall within this category of electoral systems, including FPTP and Alternative Vote (AV).²²

The electoral system used at the federal level in Canada is the "single-member plurality" system, commonly referred to as the FPTP system. In this system, separate electoral districts, or ridings, are represented by a single Member of Parliament.²³ In AV systems (sometimes called "preferential voting"), voters rank the candidates running in their riding in order of their preference; to be elected, a candidate must receive a majority of eligible votes cast. Should no candidate receive a majority on the first count, the candidate with the fewest first-preference votes is dropped, and the second preferences on the ballots where that candidate ranked first are redistributed to the respective remaining candidates. This process continues until one candidate receives the necessary majority. This system is used to elect Australia's House of Representatives, for example.

Plurality and majority systems are widely cited as presenting challenges to women candidates seeking to win seats. According to the IPU, in 2012, women won on average only 14% of seats contested in FPTP elections.²⁴ Such systems are often described as "candidate-centred," because the electorate votes for an individual, as opposed to a party. Critics suggest that in such systems, political parties and voters are more likely to support candidates viewed as "safe and mainstream," which can exclude women, who may be perceived as a riskier choice.²⁵ Finally, because political parties have less control over which candidates ultimately win each riding, gender quotas are more difficult to mandate and enforce in plurality and majority systems.

Table 2 – Selected Countries with Plurality or Majority Electoral Systems and the Representation of Women in the Lower House, June 2016

Country	Rank in the World for Women's Representation	Proportion of Women Legislators (%)
Denmark	21 st	37.4
United Kingdom	48 th	29.4
Australia	56 th	26.7
Canada	62 nd	26.0
United States	96 th	19.4

Source: Table prepared by the author using data obtained from the Inter-Parliamentary Union, "World Classification," [Women in national parliaments](#), based on information provided by national parliaments as of 1 June 2016.

4.2 PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION SYSTEMS

Proportional representation (PR) systems seek to match a political party's vote share with its seat allocation in the legislature. In such systems, the electorate generally votes for several candidates, or a party, and the results determine which individual members will sit in the legislature, as well as the overall distribution of seats belonging to each party.²⁶

A main form of PR is List PR. Under this system, political parties create a regional or national list of its candidates running in each constituency. In closed-list PR, the party ranks the names on the list, and citizens vote for a party, not a specific candidate. Once all votes have been counted, each party is awarded seats in proportion to its share of the national vote. The winning candidates are chosen according to their placement on the party list. In open-list PR, voters choose a preferred candidate (or candidates) from the list of the party for which they wish to vote. This means that voters effectively determine the order in which the candidates on the list will be awarded seats.

Some contend that PR systems, particularly List PR systems, are the most favourable to women candidates.²⁷ This is because of the control political parties have over the election of a gender-balanced caucus. PR systems can provide greater incentive for parties to broaden their appeal by adding women to their party lists. In some jurisdictions, namely the Nordic countries, the use of party lists to balance the number of male and female candidates on the list has increased the demand for female candidates across the spectrum of parties. In other jurisdictions, PR electoral systems have facilitated the implementation of formal gender quotas, which are relatively simple to implement and enforce due to the use of party lists.²⁸

Although the Nordic countries have had great success in increasing women's representation with their List PR systems, there is no overall consensus among researchers regarding the relationship between the election of women and PR electoral systems. Some say that PR electoral systems are "party-centred," rendering the personal characteristics (for example, gender) of candidates less influential in voter decision-making. Some have found that PR promotes the election of women in advanced democracies, but is less likely to do so in emerging democracies,²⁹ while others have suggested that PR does not promote the election of women to a greater degree than single-member plurality or majority systems.³⁰

Some single out open-list PR systems as being advantageous to women, because there are often many candidates listed on a ballot, which can lead parties to engage in “ticket-balancing” – whereby there is a balance between women and men candidates listed.³¹

In considering PR electoral systems and women’s representation, it is important to note that these systems are flexible and vary considerably from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. For this reason, it is difficult to draw broad conclusions concerning PR and women’s representation. Key factors that may increase women’s representation in PR systems are women’s placement or ranking on party lists, formal gender quotas, and voluntary quotas established by political parties.

Table 3 shows examples of countries that use List-PR electoral systems and the proportion of women in their legislatures.

Table 3 – Selected Countries with List Proportional Representation Electoral Systems and the Representation of Women in the Lower House, June 2016

Country	Rank in the World for Women's Representation	Proportion of Women Legislators (%)
Sweden	5 th	43.6
Finland	10 th	41.5
Norway	15 th	39.6
Denmark	21 st	37.4
Chile	118 th	15.8

Source: Table prepared by the author using data obtained from the Inter-Parliamentary Union, “World Classification,” [Women in national parliaments](#), based on information provided by national parliaments as of 1 June 2016.

4.3 MIXED ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

As its name suggests, a mixed electoral system combines various elements of plurality or majority systems and PR systems. Citizens in a single-member electoral district cast two votes: one to directly elect a member to represent their constituency according to the FPTP system, and a second for a party, according to a previously established list of candidates, similar to the List PR system. A predetermined portion of the legislature’s seats are filled using the plurality vote, while the remaining seats are filled by the party list vote, allocated in proportion to the overall vote the parties received.³²

Due to the element of PR, mixed systems are considered moderately effective in promoting the election of women.³³ Under such systems, even if women continue to face obstacles getting elected in individual constituencies, parties have the ability to ensure women are elected via party lists.

An interesting example is that of New Zealand, which reformed its electoral system from FPTP to a Mixed-Member Proportional (MMP) system in 1993. The effects of the reform on the election of women were immediate. Under the FPTP system, female representation peaked at 21% in 1993. Since the switch to MMP, women’s representation in New Zealand’s parliament has never dropped below 28%.³⁴

While these changes have been positive for women's representation in New Zealand's parliament, some researchers suggest that it remains difficult to conclude that electoral reform was the direct cause of this increase in women's representation, because it occurred simultaneously with other changes to the political system.³⁵ It has also been noted that women candidates continue to find it difficult to win elections as candidates in individual electoral districts, and are being elected at higher levels in large part owing to party lists.³⁶

Table 4 shows examples of countries that use mixed electoral systems and the proportion of women in their legislatures.

Table 4 – Selected Countries with Mixed Electoral Systems and the Representation of Women in the Lower House, June 2016

Country	Rank in the World for Women's Representation	Proportion of Women Legislators (%)
Germany	26 th	36.5
New Zealand	39 th	31.4
Italy	42 nd	31.0
Japan	155 th	9.5

Source: Table prepared by the author using data obtained from the Inter-Parliamentary Union, "World Classification," [Women in national parliaments](#), based on information provided by national parliaments as of 1 June 2016.

5 QUOTAS AND WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION

5.1 GENDER QUOTAS

Gender quotas are mandatory or voluntary targets that specify the number or percentage of women that must be included on a candidate list or the number of seats to be allocated to women in a legislature.³⁷ Gender quotas have been described as the "single most effective tool for 'fast-tracking' women's representation in elected bodies of government."³⁸

It is important to note that the success of quotas can be constrained by the electoral system. A quota system that does not include rank-order regulations may have no effect and be purely symbolic. The most balanced ranking system in use is the "zipper system," in which male and female candidates alternate on a party list.³⁹ Furthermore, as noted above, an electoral gender quota does not address structural, institutional and societal barriers for women in politics, and are unlikely, as a stand-alone measure, to constitute a solution to low rates of women's representation.⁴⁰

5.2 TYPES OF GENDER QUOTAS

An electoral quota for women may be mandated in a constitution, by national legislation or by internal party policies. Constitutional or legislative quotas are mandatory, whereas those set out by parties are voluntary. Typically, quotas established in constitutions reserve a specific number of seats for women in a legislature. Such quotas are used in Jordan,⁴¹ Uganda,⁴² and Rwanda (see section 5.3 of this paper).⁴³

Quotas derived from legislation typically require that a specific number of candidates be women. For example, the gender parity quotas that France adopted in 2000 included provision for financial penalties for non-compliant political parties.⁴⁴ France's parity quotas apply strictly to elections in which members are elected through party lists (municipal council, regional, senatorial and European elections).⁴⁵ In 2014, new legislation increased the financial penalty for non-compliance with the parity imperative for candidates in legislative elections.⁴⁶

Voluntary political party quotas involve non-binding commitments made by political parties to ensure a certain percentage of female candidates on their electoral lists. Such quotas have long been used in Norway, Sweden and Germany. In Germany, for example, most of the political parties have introduced gender quotas for candidates. Germany's Green Party requires that 50% of candidates be women. Die Linke has also opted for a 50% quota and has assigned the first or the second position on the party list, as well as all following odd positions, to as many women candidates as are available. The Social Democratic Party has established a 40% quota for women.⁴⁷

5.3 CONSTITUTIONAL QUOTAS IN RWANDA

While some countries, like Germany, Sweden and Norway, have had great success in increasing women's representation through voluntary gender quotas adopted by political parties, some African countries have had similar successes through constitutional quotas. Rwanda, for example, has ranked first in the world in women's representation since 2003, with women comprising 48.8% to 63.8% of legislators in the lower house.⁴⁸

The increase in women's representation can be linked primarily to the adoption in 2003 of two key constitutional requirements under the Constitution of the Rwandan Republic. First, at least 30% of the 53 members elected using closed-list PR must be women. The second constitutional requirement provides for an additional 24 seats that are reserved for women elected through "women-only elections" in which only women can stand for election and only women can vote.

Although the constitutional quotas have undoubtedly been key to improving women's representation in Rwanda, it is important to consider the context under which they were established. According to a UNICEF publication on Rwanda and women legislators, the dramatic gains for women in the Rwandan Parliament can be traced partially to the significant changes in gender roles following the tragic events of the 1994 Rwandan genocide.⁴⁹ With women and girls making up 70% of the Rwandan population immediately following the genocide, women were left to lead their households and communities, and were key in rebuilding the nation.⁵⁰ The UNICEF publication adds that it is widely held by Rwandans that "women bore the brunt of the genocide and therefore deserve a significant and official role in the nation's recovery."⁵¹ For that reason, Rwanda's post-genocide constitution ensured women would be adequately represented in the legislature.

Senegal and Uganda are two African countries with similar constitutional quotas that also have high representation of women in national legislatures.

6 CONCLUSION

Women's participation and success in electoral politics is a vital indicator of the health of a representative democracy. Electoral systems and gender quotas affect women's representation within a legislature, but are not the sole determinants of high or low representation. It is recognized that each country has a unique set of social, cultural and political factors that determine who is elected to its legislature.

NOTES

1. UN Women and UNDP [United Nations Development Programme], [Inclusive Electoral Processes: A Guide for Electoral Management Bodies on Promoting Gender Equality and Women's Participation](#), 2015.
2. UN Women, [Parliaments and Local Governance](#).
3. Inter-Parliamentary Union [IPU], [Parliaments at a glance: Women parliamentarians](#).
4. IPU, "World Classification," [Women in national parliaments](#), accessed 1 April 2016.
5. IPU, "World Average," [Women in national parliaments](#), accessed 1 February 2016.
6. IPU, "Table 2, Top 5 factors that deter men and women from entering politics," [Women in Parliament: 20 years in review](#), 2015, p. 4.
7. Brenda O'Neill, "[Unpacking Gender's Role in Political Representation in Canada](#)," *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Summer 2015.
8. Melanee Thomas and Marc André Bodet, "Sacrificial lambs, women candidates, and district competitiveness in Canada," *Electoral Studies*, Vol. 32, 2013, pp. 153–166.
9. Melanee Thomas, "[Barriers to Women's Political Participation in Canada](#)," *University of New Brunswick Law Journal*, Vol. 64, 2013, p. 228.
10. Ibid.
11. O'Neill (2015).
12. Law Commission of Canada, *Voting Counts: Electoral Reform for Canada*, 2004, p. 10.
13. Thomas and Bodet (2013), p. 160.
14. O'Neill (2015).
15. [Constitution of the New Democratic Party of Canada](#), Article VI 3(h)(i), April 2013.
16. New Democratic Party, "[Women's Council Constitution](#)," *Canada's New Democrats: Women's Council*.
17. "[50% population, 25% representation. Why the parliamentary gender gap?](#)," *CBC News*.
18. See, for example, Pippa Norris, *Electoral Engineering: Voting Rules and Political Behavior*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2004; Arend Lijphart, "Constitutional Choices for New Democracies," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 15, 2004; and Mona Lena Krook, "The Political Representation of Women and Minorities," in *Comparing Democracies 4: Elections and Voting in a Changing World*, ed. Lawrence Leduc, Richard G. Nieme and Pippa Norris, Sage, London, 2014.
19. Julie Cool, [Women in Parliament](#), Publication No. 2011-56-E, Parliamentary Information and Research Service, Library of Parliament, Ottawa, 2 July 2013.

20. Andrew Roberts, Jason Seawright and Jennifer Cyr, "Do Electoral Laws Affect Women's Representation?," *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 12, 2013, p. 1555.
21. Ibid., p. 1574.
22. See Andre Barnes, Dara Lithwick and Erin Virgint, [Electoral Systems and Electoral Reform in Canada and Elsewhere: An Overview](#), Publication no. 2016-06-E, Parliamentary Information and Research Service, Library of Parliament, Ottawa, 23 June 2016, for a more in-depth discussion of the various plurality and majority systems.
23. Ibid.
24. IPU, [Women in Parliament in 2012 The Year in Perspective](#), 2012.
25. Krook (2014), p. 100.
26. Barnes et al. (2016).
27. Krook (2014), p. 100.
28. Ibid.
29. Richard Matland, "Women's Legislative Representation in National Legislatures: A Comparison of Democracies in Developed and Developing Countries," *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 28, 1998.
30. Robert Moser and Ethan Scheiner, *Electoral Systems and Political Context: How the Effects of Rules Vary Across New and Established Democracies*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2012.
31. Ibid.
32. Barnes et al. (2016).
33. IPU (2012).
34. New Zealand Parliament, [The 2014 New Zealand General Election: Final Results and Voting Statistics](#), Parliamentary Library Research Paper, February 2015.
35. Norris (2004), pp. 202–203.
36. New Zealand Parliament (2015).
37. Drude Dahlerup et al., [Atlas of Electoral Gender Quotas](#), International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance [IDEA], IPU and Stockholm University, 2013.
38. Ibid., p. 16.
39. Blanca Delgado-Márquez, Victoriano Ramirez-González and Adolfo López-Carmona, "Ensuring Parliamentary Gender Equality Through a New Zipper Method: An Application to Finland," *Social Indicators Research*, Vol. 116, Issue 2, 2014, p. 476.
40. Dahlerup et al. (2013).
41. IPU, [Jordan: Majlis Al-Nuwaab \(House of Representatives\)](#).
42. IPU, [Uganda: Parliament](#).
43. IPU, [Rwanda: Chambre des Députés \(Chamber of Deputies\)](#).
44. European Parliament, Directorate-General for Internal Policies, Policy Department C: Citizen's Rights and Constitutional Affairs, [The Policy on Gender Equality in France](#), 2015.
45. Ibid., p. 10.
46. Ibid.

47. European Parliament, Directorate-General for Internal Policies, Policy Department C: Citizen's Rights and Constitutional Affairs, [*The Policy on Gender Equality in Germany*](#), 2015, p. 12.
48. IPU, "Archived Data," [*Women in National Parliaments*](#).
49. Elizabeth Powley, [*Rwanda: The Impact of Women Legislators on Policy Outcomes Affecting Children and Families*](#), UNICEF, December 2006.
50. Ibid., p. 3.
51. Ibid.