

Gender quotas in Mexico not reducing quality of female candidates

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Caroline Beer, associate professor of political science, has extended her research on democratization by looking into the effects of gender quotas in politics.

Credit: Andy Duback

A new study examining the impact of a series of gender quotas passed by Mexico to ensure equal representation in government shows no drop in the qualifications of women in office after two election cycles, and also refutes the widely held perception that women rely on personal connections more than men to get elected.

Findings of the study, published online in the journal *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, are in direct opposition to critics who argued that the new reforms would result in a wave of unqualified [women](#) in key political positions, and illustrates the importance of giving gender-based reforms time to be fully implemented and put into practice before drawing conclusions.

Based on detailed biographical data of more than 500 Mexican senators since 1964 when women first took office, the study shows that women were actually more qualified than men prior to the initial passage of gender quotas in the 1990s in all major indicators including [educational attainment](#) and political experience. Data from the initial years following the implementation of the quotas (1994-2006), however, showed a steep drop in the educational attainment levels of women in office and to a lesser degree political experience, providing fodder for anti-quota critics.

It wasn't until Caroline Beer, lead author of the study and associate professor of political science at the University of Vermont, decided to also look at the qualifications of women in the senate after two election cycles that it became clear women had caught back up in terms of qualifications and were on par with those of men.

"My thought was that if women had to have more experience and be better qualified candidates to be successful that was an indicator that they were being discriminated against, and in fact that was the case prior to the quotas," says Beer, an expert in comparative and Latin American politics and democratization. "The data from the early years after implementation showed that people who thought quotas would produce unqualified candidates were right, especially when it came to women with bachelor's degrees. The most interesting finding was this blip before women caught back up again and were just as qualified as their male counterparts."

The question is why?

Beer, who co-authored the study with Claremont McKenna College Professor Roderic Camp, theorizes that more women decided to run for office once they realized the reforms were legitimate, compared to the pre-quota era when the qualifications for women were higher, limiting the pool of candidates with a realistic chance of winning.

"Sometimes we think of candidate selection like supply and demand," says Beer. "You have a set supply of men and women, and when women were discriminated against there were fewer of them because they were required to have higher qualifications. All of a sudden, the demand for women increases due to the quotas, so the quality dips because you have to reach pretty deep into the barrel. Once women realized that the new law was for real and going to be enforced, the supply started to increase and quality of the candidates becomes equal to that of men after two election cycles. This also helped create a more diverse pool of women candidates."

Women don't rely more on personal connections

Mexico's transition to democracy from an authoritarian one-party system governed by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional was slow and incremental and took a series of reforms in the 1990s to create a more competitive and inclusive multi-party system. In many cases male politicians relied on family connections to get elected or benefited from a system rife with cronyism.

In the early days of the gender equality laws, wives of individuals in office were placed on ballots in order to meet quotas, increasing the number of women with a relative in public life by 20 percent. Some laws had to be changed to stop these practices, including one that didn't

specify who could be listed as an alternative to a candidate. A number of women senators in 2009, for example, were put forth as candidates only to resign after being elected so their male alternates could take over their seat.

In her article "Democracy, Gender Quotas, and Political Recruitment," Beer explains how she used a [personal connections](#) variable via a relative in public life to show that women do not rely more on personal and family connections than men to gain public office.

"The assumption is that when women get into power it's because they are the wife or daughter of someone important, but it's also true that men have close personal relationships or family ties" says Beer. "We predicted that women would be more likely to have personal contacts before democracy and gender quotas in order to overcome discrimination when in fact they actually had fewer personal connections during that time. Women's personal contacts took on increased importance during the transition period due to corrupt practices, but after the implementation of compulsory gender quotas, the percentage of women with a relative in public life declined to levels similar to the pre-democracy level."

More information: Caroline C. Beer et al. Democracy, gender quotas, and political recruitment in Mexico, *Politics, Groups, and Identities* (2015). [DOI: 10.1080/21565503.2015.1120223](https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2015.1120223)

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