

# A SEAT AT THE TABLE:

Five Steps to Making Latin American Politics More Diverse



### **About Americas Society**

Americas Society is the premier forum dedicated to education, debate, and dialogue in the Americas. Its mission is to foster an understanding of the contemporary political, social, and economic issues confronting Latin America, the Caribbean, and Canada, and to increase public awareness and appreciation of the diverse cultural heritage of the Americas and the importance of the inter-American relationship.

### **About the Author**

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Written by Andrew Downie

**T**he story of political representation is not unlike many stories in Latin America. Progress has indeed been made, with some notable success stories, but the region is still home to stark contrasts and there is much work to be done. Women and indigenous, Afro-descendant, and LGBT people are still too often shut out of decision-making processes on the national, state and municipal levels. Without true political representation, even the best-intentioned efforts to combat the disadvantages that these groups face will be insufficient.

Compared to female representation in governments around the world, Latin America is doing well—at least on a national level. Not only have women won presidential elections in many of the region’s biggest democracies—most notably in Argentina, Brazil and Chile—but the number of women in Congress is relatively high. Of the 10 countries worldwide with the highest representation of women in their lower houses of Congress, five are in Latin America, according to data compiled by the Inter-Parliamentary Union. Overall, more than a quarter of federal lawmakers in the region are female, behind only the Nordic countries, where the number is just over 41 percent.

But further down the chain, the statistics become less encouraging, and the number of women elected at the state and municipal levels remains low. In Brazil, for example, just under 12 percent of the mayors elected in October’s municipal elections were female, down slightly from elections in 2012.

It is a similar story of highs and lows for LGBT lawmakers. In many ways, Latin America leads the world in advancing LGBT equality at a legislative level, and few cities can boast of being gay-friendly destinations like São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires. But violence against LGBT people remains rife in the region as a whole, and a lack of LGBT representation in politics has been one barrier to passing the kind of antidiscrimination laws that could target such violence. In February 2017,



**Women held just over half of the seats in Bolivia’s Plurinational Legislative Assembly in 2016.**



there were 15 out national-level legislators in all of Latin America, according to Dr. Andrew Reynolds, director of the LGBT Representation and Rights Research Initiative at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The panorama is perhaps most worrying when it comes to Afro-descendant and indigenous populations. In 2016, *Americas Quarterly* found that in no country in the region where data was available was the percentage of indigenous lawmakers higher than the percentage of indigenous people in the population as a whole. In some countries, the disparity is striking. For example, there are no indigenous lawmakers at the national level in Brazil, where around 1 million people classify themselves as indigenous, according to Cleber César Buzatto, executive secretary of Conselho Indigenista Missionário, an indigenous rights group.

When it comes to Afro-descendants, only Peru passes the test. There, Afro-Peruvians make up 2.3 percent of legislators and 1.5 percent of the general population.

Levels of political inclusion that are this low do little to empower minorities, and may hamper progress elsewhere in society. The scenario will likely continue unless systemic societal issues like sexism, racism, and inequitable access to education are addressed.

“I want more women and disabled people and blacks and indigenous people in power, but if society doesn’t understand what they represent then it is only symbolic,” said Jaime Parada, the first openly gay politician elected in Chile. “Social change is what matters.”

While these struggles continue, governments and civil society should take concrete, pragmatic steps to

Jaime Parada made history as the first openly gay elected official in Chile.



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increase levels of political representation. Americas Society consulted experts from diverse fields and identified five strategies to get the region’s democracies moving in the right direction.

### **1 Commit to quotas. They’re a start.**

Quotas are the one strategy nearly all countries in Latin America have used to get more women and minorities into politics. In recent decades, Quotas have worked, to varying degrees, despite their often flawed and controversial nature.

Across the region, quotas target a variety of groups. Some countries, like Colombia and Bolivia, have set aside reserved seats in the legislature for indigenous people and/or Afro-descendants, while Argentina’s Buenos Aires province passed a historic quota system in 2015 to ensure that the provincial government hires transgender staff members. However, the primary use of quotas has been to get more women into legislative positions. By 2014, 16 of 20 Latin American countries had adopted gender quota laws for national legislatures.

But while every country in Latin America, except Chile, Guatemala, and Venezuela, has some form of legislated quota system in place to ensure women’s representation in politics, the results remain uneven. More than half of the members of Bolivia’s national legislature, for example, are women. On the flip side, there is not a single female lawmaker in the Haitian parliament. This is the case despite the fact that Haiti’s constitution stipulates that 30 percent of government positions must be held by females, said Vivian Roza, coordinator of the Inter-American Development Bank’s Program for the Support of Women’s Leadership and Representation (PROLID).

Even when quotas do have the desired effect, they’re just a start, and certainly not a panacea. Women are too often treated as second-class citizens in a region where machismo remains rampant, said Tarcila Rivera Zea, an indigenous leader in Peru.

“Indigenous women get in through the quota system, but then they are relegated to last place and they don’t have the same consideration when it comes to making decisions,” Rivera told Americas Society. “The majority decides or the ruling party decides. So we are just the decoration. It can be frustrating.”

Mara Gabrilli was the first quadriplegic person elected to Brazil's lower house.



## 2 Enforce quotas.

The biggest obstacle to ensuring that quota laws are more than just window dressing comes in their implementation. They must come with a stick as well as a carrot.

In Brazil, for example, 30 percent of candidates on the country's open slate list system must be female. But parties can select more candidates than there are seats, so even when they do comply with the law, that doesn't ensure that 30 percent of their winning candidates are female. Such maneuvers explain why just 11 percent of lawmakers in Brazil's Congress are women, one of the lowest percentages in Latin America.

"In Brazil they stack the list with sacrificial female candidates who show up at the bottom," said Dr. Jennifer M. Piscopo, assistant professor of politics in the Latin American and Latino/a studies program at Occidental College. "That makes quotas difficult in Brazil. There are a series of clever loopholes."

Measures designed to ensure women get media exposure and funding are also open to abuse. In Brazil, 10 percent of publicly financed television ads must

go to women, and 5 percent of financing must be devoted to training female candidates, said Roza. Colombia, Costa Rica, Honduras, and Panama all have similar types of programs, she added. However, the time they get is often not primetime, said Mara Gabrilli, a disabled member of Congress from São Paulo, and there is little women can do inside their own parties to redress the imbalance.

Such loopholes can be countered with solid electoral institutes and uncompromising judges. Mexico is an example of how this is possible. When parties failed to meet quota requirements that 40 percent of their congressional candidates be women, there was a quick response.

"The parties got 48 hours warning and if they didn't comply, the electoral institute would cancel their registration," said Dr. Magda Hinojosa, a professor at Arizona State University who studies the representation of women in Latin American politics. "The parties were sufficiently scared that they over-complied with the quota. If you have real bite to your laws and if there is a real enforcement, then those mechanisms can work."



### 3 Form diverse alliances.

One of the most natural ways for minority groups to win political support is by forming networks—and not always with the most obvious partners.

That strategy has been particularly effective for LGBT citizens across the region, but most notably in Argentina, Mexico and Ecuador, said Javier Corrales, a professor of political science at Amherst College in Massachusetts who has written extensively about politics and sexuality in Latin America. LGBT groups in Argentina have formed alliances with various social movements, and in particular human rights organizations. In Mexico, they linked up with democracy groups that have been working on grassroots political issues since the 1990s. In Ecuador, an alliance with powerful feminist and indigenous groups helped LGBT advocates win protection for sexual and gender minorities in the 2008 constitution.

Even politicians who might be assumed to be more conservative have been known to make efforts to appeal to LGBT voters when there is close competition

among parties for votes. And when such politicians embrace LGBT issues, they often create space for leaders from the LGBT community. That happened in Argentina, where the center-right businessman turned politician and now President Mauricio Macri has embraced pro-LGBT positions in a political showdown against the left. Now, one of Argentina's most visible rising gay political figures, Pedro Robledo, is a member of Macri's Propuesta Republicana (PRO) party and serves as national subsecretary of youth in Macri's government. In Mexico City, Corrales argued, something similar happened when the leftist PRD took on pro-LGBT positions as another way of setting themselves apart from the right-wing PAN party and the centrist PRI. Finally, in Chile, it was the lesser known center-right National Renewal Party that was the first to publicly back LGBT rights, because, according to Corrales, the party's candidate, Sebastián Piñera, was lagging in the polls to the center-left Concertación coalition. Piñera's pragmatism spoke loudest and the decision he made led to a commitment to legalize same-sex unions as well as support of



**In Argentina,  
steady activism  
has kept  
politicians  
from ignoring  
LGBT issues.**

one of the strongest anti-hate laws in the hemisphere.

“If there is a strong dominant leftist party that hasn’t done much to improve the lot of LGBT people, then the center-right will begin to move in this direction,” Corrales told Americas Society.

Alliances are also critical on a personal level. Old style political networking, particularly for men, traditionally happens at night in bars and smoke-filled rooms. Women and minorities are often excluded from these old boys’ clubs. The alternative is to create different networks that provide not just support, but training, advice and coaching. PROLID, the IDB’s program to support women’s leadership and representation, is a prime example. The network has around 1,700 women on their books, often from sectors traditionally dominated by men, such as public security.

“(PROLID) creates spaces and makes us more visible in an area where not a lot of women are active,” said Laura Carrera, coordinator of the police development system of Mexico’s Federal Police. “And that opens doors for other women to be more visible.”

## **4 Invest in safety nets.**

Unfortunately, the financial burdens of entering politics keep many from disadvantaged groups from even trying—and ensure continued political success for wealthy elites. Policies aimed at ensuring that economic growth is inclusive and equitable, such as employment anti-discrimination laws, are thus essential to ensuring diverse political representation.

Michelle Suárez Bértora, a Uruguayan lawyer who in 2014 became the first transgender person elected to a national legislature in the Americas, said that for marginalized groups like transgender people, poverty puts entering politics particularly out of reach. “We can’t think of quotas, we need to first successfully implement means of social access,” she told Americas Society. “If you can include trans people socially first, then that can allow them to move into politics later.”

Campaign finance rules can also be used to limit the influence of wealth in entering politics. The financial burden after a politician leaves office or loses a long, costly race may discourage someone from a marginalized group from running in the first place. Traditional politicians, often backed by elite families or business interests, have jobs to fall back on or clearly defined paths in business, civil service or academia. Minority candidates who try their luck and fail rarely have the same cushion.

“In Washington when you lose you become a professor or work for a think tank; there is a safety net,” said Judith Morrison, the senior advisor for the gender and diversity division at the IDB. “But in Latin America, your role is questioned and many people are demonized. How do you pay your bills and how do you live? That’s a huge question for outsider politicians who don’t have access to the elite channels that provide support and financial access.”

## **5 Foster solidarity once in office.**

There is power in unity, and minorities in government can help others coming from the same historically marginalized groups—but only if they remain committed to the cause.

In Colombia, for example, the promise of guaranteed seats for black Colombians prompted the formation of some 65 new parties. However, the parties spent too much time fighting amongst themselves and not enough time working together towards common goals. The plethora of parties—and the competition among them—allowed established parties to more easily ignore what they considered “special interest” groups.

For Peru’s Rivera, establishing unity among indigenous groups and other minority movements is critical to making change happen in politics for underrepresented groups. “Articulated indigenous movements are still pending in this country,” she told Americas Society. “We lack unity, Andinos and Amazonicos, in the city and the countryside. We need

Soledad Chapetón  
serves as the first  
female mayor of  
El Alto, Bolivia, a  
politically important  
and growing city.

clear proposals and we need to learn to work with other sectors and allies.”

Solidarity is a key issue both before and after elections. In 2007, a group of Mexican women created a specialist consultancy called Sostén that helped women candidates prepare their candidacy and then create effective campaigns once they got on the ballot.

“We showed what a woman can do differently,” said Carrera. “We used to see that women didn’t always vote for other women. Today, women are more likely to see other women as allies and vote for them.”

Maintaining that support in parliament is also vital. Mala Htun, one of the hemisphere’s leading experts on political representation, found that in Argentina, the first country in the world to pass gender quotas in 1991, not all female legislators advocated for women’s rights. “The likelihood that women’s rights bills would be approved (has) declined, suggesting that formal and informal norms marginalizing women and reducing their legislative efficacy persisted,” Htun wrote in her book, *Inclusion without Representation in Latin America: Gender Quotas and Ethnic Reservations*. In counterpoint, evidence also suggested that having more women in politics made it more likely that male lawmakers would write legislation related to women’s rights.

Htun also found that in Bolivia, as the number of indigenous lawmakers rose—from two in 1979 to 38 in 2009—it took time before they saw the advantages of voting as a block. Indigenous lawmakers voted collectively on indigenous legislation only 50 percent of the time during the 1989–93 parliament. But they learned there was power in presenting a common front and in recent years they have formed a united and even stubborn bloc when indigenous issues are being debated.

## Takeaways

While these five steps don’t offer a universal roadmap for political representation, they’re an important start, and there’s evidence across the region that they work. While statistics on the representation of women and minorities can be discouraging, the stories of leaders who have broken barriers in politics are reason to have hope.

Many of them used the very strategies just described. In Bolivia, Soledad Chapetón, the daughter of Aymaran campesinos, gained support from an unlikely ally—Samuel Doria Medina, a cement magnate turned politician who leads the country’s National Unity party. That support helped Chapetón become the first female mayor of the politically important city of El Alto in early 2015. In Uruguay, national deputy Gloria Rodríguez made history as the first Afro-Uruguayan woman elected to Congress, and she credited gender quotas in the 2014 election as being instrumental to her success. Meanwhile, other leaders around the region, like Costa Rica’s Epsy Campbell Barr, are fighting to help share the success they’ve found with others. Campbell, an influential black politician who serves in Costa Rica’s National Assembly and ran for president twice, coordinated the Network of Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latin American Women. Most recently, she organized a conference for black lawmakers from throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

While the region has a long way to go, leaders like Campbell, Chapetón and Rodríguez leave us with the sense that Latin American politics is becoming more representative of the people who call the region home. In times of economic and geopolitical uncertainty, some good news like that is more than welcome.



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