

Polish elections demonstrate the limitations of gender quotas as a tool for increasing female representation

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Gender quotas, under which a party is obliged to include a certain number of female candidates on electoral lists, have been put forward as a method for increasing the representation of women in national parliaments. [Maciej A. Górecki](#) and [Paula Kukołowicz](#) write on the use of gender quotas in Polish elections. They highlight that while quotas have greatly increased the number of female candidates standing in elections, they have not produced a similar rise in the number of women entering parliament. They argue that this may be the result of quotas tightening the competition for female candidates who appeal to the same sections of the electorate.



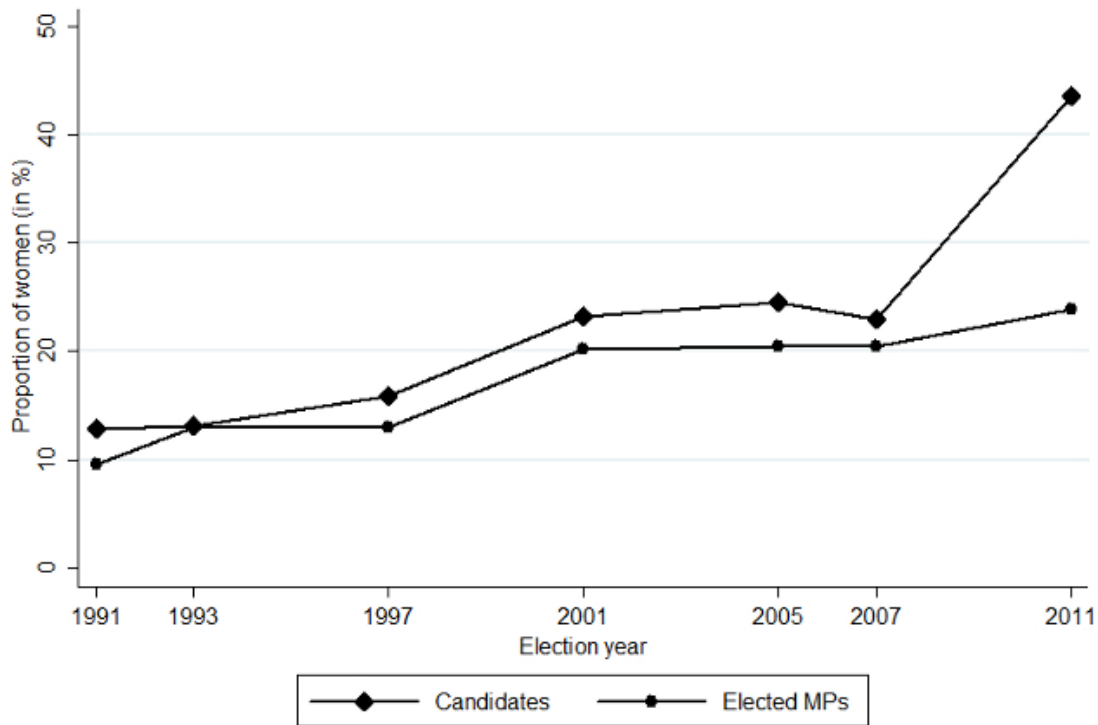
Save for a few exceptions, women are underrepresented in the democratically elected parliaments around the world. A potential remedy, relied on in more and more countries, is to implement gender quota regulations. Most often, such regulations require political parties to include a stipulated minimum percentage of women among their candidates.



Proponents of such regulations tend to assume implicitly that voters are largely indifferent about candidate gender and, therefore, an increase in the proportion of women among the candidates should cause a corresponding increase in the proportion of women among elected MPs. In a recent study, focusing on the effects of quota regulations in Poland, we have shown that the above assumption might be fundamentally dubious. Namely, increasing the number of female candidates contesting elections might lead to a decline in women's electoral performance relative to their male counterparts.

Poland introduced its gender quota law in January of 2011. The law requires that every district-level list prepared by a party includes at least 35 per cent of candidates of each gender. These regulations took effect starting from the parliamentary election held in October of 2011. Poland uses an open-list proportional representation electoral system, that is, a system where parties present voters with lists of candidates but voters are then allowed to select any candidate they wish. Figure 1 below presents proportions of women among the candidates to the lower chamber of the Polish parliament (the *Sejm*) and among the elected members of the chamber between 1991 and 2011: i.e. throughout the entire period of post-communist transition.

Figure 1: Proportion of female candidates and elected members in the Polish Sejm (1991-2011)



Note: For further details see the authors' article in [Electoral Studies](#)

One striking detail stands out here. While before the introduction of quotas the proportion of women among the elected MPs reflected, by and large, the corresponding figure for the candidates to the *Sejm*, it was no longer so in 2011. During the last election, the proportion of women among the candidates nearly doubled (an increase from 23 to 43.5 per cent), certainly because of quotas, but this was not accompanied by a comparable increase in the number of elected female MPs. The large gap between the two figures is unique in the entire post-communist era.

On the one hand, one can still say that the proportion of women among those elected to the chamber rose from 20.4 per cent in 2007 to 23.9 per cent in 2011, which means 16 additional seats won by women. On the other, women's parliamentary representation had improved substantially also during the pre-quota period (1991-2007). It is thus rather uncertain if quotas caused the increase in the number of women among the MPs elected in 2011.

Indeed other factors, unrelated to quotas, might be pointed to here. For instance, the largest Polish party – [Civic Platform](#) – increased the number of women assigned top positions on the party's district-level lists from the mere 5 (out of 41) in 2007 to 13 (out of 41) in 2011. As candidates running from top list positions on behalf of one of the two largest parties are all but guaranteed a seat, this one decision alone resulted in 8 additional seats being won by women.

Why have gender quotas failed to increase representation?

In addition to the above analysis, we have also analysed the results of two consecutive elections to the *Sejm*: the last pre-quota election (held in 2007) and the first post-quota one (held in 2011). Both elections were contested by a large number of candidates: 6,187 in 2007 and 7,035 in 2011.

We use a data set comprising multiple characteristics of all candidates contesting both of these elections. These characteristics refer to candidates' political and non-political background and range from experience in national and local politics to professional or even celebrity status. This is important as some previous scientific studies on the topic demonstrated that voters prefer candidates with a specific background, especially previous experience in politics. Since finding women with such a background poses difficulties, quotas might not be effective because of

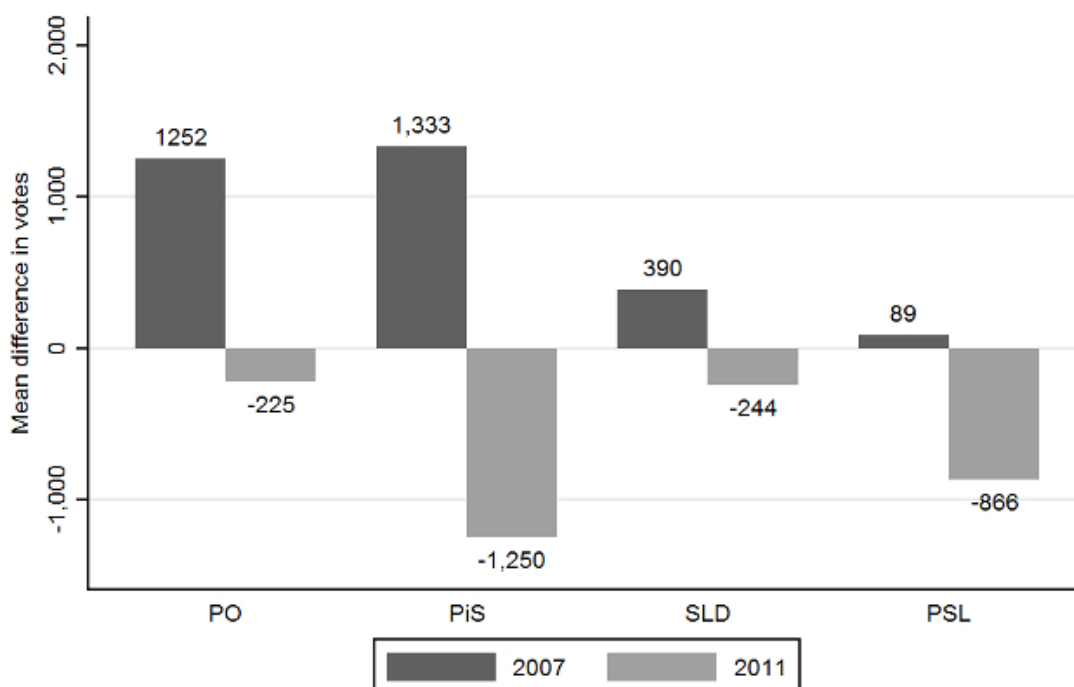
the shortage of strong female candidates.

We simulate the between-gender differences in the numbers of votes cast for candidates running on behalf of major parties, assuming a hypothetical situation where candidates differ only with respect to gender but not with respect to other traits. The results, presented in Figure 2, are very telling. In 2007 – that is, before quotas were introduced – female candidates running on behalf of all four major parties enjoyed an advantage over their male counterparts.

This was particularly evident in the case of the two largest parties: [Civic Platform](#) and [Law and Justice](#). For those two parties, a simulated ‘surplus’ as regards the number of votes cast for an ‘average’ female candidate – comparing to the number of votes cast for a man – easily exceeded 1,000. These are significant numbers of votes, constituting 17.0 and 23.6 per cent of votes cast, on average, for a candidate of, respectively, the former and the latter party.

After the installation of quotas in 2011, we observe the opposite situation. Women running on behalf of all four major parties suffer a disadvantage relative to their male counterparts. The disadvantage is most pronounced in the case of the socially conservative parties, namely [Law and Justice](#) and the [Polish People’s Party](#), but it is also apparent in the case of the other two (socially more liberal) parties. Notably, the observed disadvantage of female candidates relative to male candidates in the post-quota election cannot be explained solely by the fact that many new women with only weak political experience contested the election.

Figure 2: Difference in the average number of votes received by female and male candidates in the 2007 and 2011 Polish elections



Note: The value in the vertical axis indicates the difference between the average number of votes cast for female and male candidates in each election. A positive value indicates that on average female candidates received more votes than male candidates, while a negative value indicates the opposite. The four parties in the horizontal axis are: [Civic Platform \(PO\)](#); [Law and Justice \(PiS\)](#); [Democratic Left Alliance \(SLD\)](#); [Polish People’s Party \(PSL\)](#).

We explain the results of our study by the notion of identity politics. When women constitute an obvious minority among the candidates a female candidate can use her gender to her advantage. First, the fact of being a woman distinguishes her from the crowd. Second, gender can operate in the same way as religious or regional background

in that it gives her access to specific groups of voters: in this case, women's groups and associations.

However, the advantages derived from identity politics vanish in the situation of a substantial increase in the number of female candidates, for instance as a result of quota law regulations. This is because gender-based identity politics rely upon relatively small 'niches' within the electorate, while the overwhelming majority of voters prefer male candidates. According to stereotypes held commonly by voters, most areas of politics and policy are 'masculine' domains. Hence, an increase in the numbers of women contesting elections might only result in more and more female candidates competing for votes in the same (arguably finite) 'women-friendly niches' of the electorate. Consequently, women's electoral performance will, on average, decline relative to the performance of male candidates.

Overall, our results suggest a rather pessimistic view of the effectiveness of quotas in fostering women's political representation under open-list proportional representation systems. Countries implementing quotas might fall into a paradoxical situation. In an effort to enhance women's representation, parties are forced to put forward more female candidates, thereby increasing women's visibility during elections. At the same time, we seem to have overlooked the apparent fact that a female candidate does well at the polls only when there are few other women running. Votes available for women are simply limited. Thus, as the number of female competitors increases, the inherent difficulties of an electoral contest are magnified for an 'average' female candidate.

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