

# The Impact of Electoral Systems on Women's Political Representation

There is a strong relationship between electoral systems and the number of women in legislative assemblies. According to Norris (2004), “electoral systems represent, perhaps, the most powerful instrument available for institutional engineering, with far reaching-consequences for party systems, the composition of legislatures, and the durability of democratic arrangements” (p. 209). By translating the votes cast in a general election into seats won by parties and candidates, electoral systems determine who gains power; how power will be shared, and the nature of representation in any system of government. Electoral systems also act as conduits through which constituencies can hold their elected representatives accountable.

There is a general consensus in the literature on political representation that countries applying a proportional representation (PR) system have a higher number of women in their national parliaments than those with single-member, first-past-the-post systems (Matland 1998; Reynolds 1999; Kenworthy and Malami 2005; Siaroff 2000; Moser 2001). List proportional representation systems such as parallel and mixed member proportional (MMP) systems generally provide the best political opportunity for women (ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities) to be elected to parliament. Electoral systems that rely on single-member districts (such as the First-Past-the-Post System or the Alternative Vote System) often fail to guarantee proportional representation or a minimal percentage of seats for minorities (unless there are special provisions in place or additional seats are elected by party lists). In a comparative study carried out on thirteen (13) democracies with parliamentary systems over a 30-year time span (1960 to the late 1980s), Lijphart (1994) found that (PR) systems were superior to plurality/majority systems based on certain ‘quality factors.’ These include greater representation of minority interests, much higher representation of women in legislatures, a much higher voter turnout and greater income equality. During the period under study, four democracies used single-member district elections (Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) while nine used PR (Germany, Italy, Austria, the Netherlands, Belgium, Finland and three Scandinavian countries) (Lijphart 1994).

Comparative data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) (2016) on women in national parliaments also shows that today roughly twice as many women get

**Table 1** Women in national parliaments by electoral system type

Rank	Countries	% Women	Electoral system
1	Rwanda	63.8	PR
2	Bolivia	53.1	Mixed
3	Cuba	48.9	Plurality/majority
4	Seychelles	43.8	Mixed
5	Sweden	43.6	PR
6	Senegal	42.7	Mixed
7	Mexico	42.4	Mixed
	South Africa	42.4	PR
9	Ecuador	41.6	PR
10	Finland	41.5	PR
11	Iceland	41.3	PR
	Namibia	41.3	PR
	Nicaragua	41.3	PR
14	Spain	40	PR
15	Mozambique	39.6	PR
	Norway	39.6	PR
17	Andorra	39.3	Mixed
	Belgium	39.3	PR
19	Ethiopia	38.8	Plurality/majority
20	Timor-Leste	38.5	PR
21	Denmark	37.4	PR
22	Netherlands	37.3	PR
23	Angola	36.8	PR
24	Slovenia	36.7	PR
25	United Republic of Tanzania	36.60	Plurality/majority

Source IPU (2016)

elected to national parliaments via List PR systems than they do under majoritarian systems. The IPU compared electoral systems used in 193 countries to determine the percentage of women in national parliaments. The countries are classified in descending order of the percentage of women in the lower or single house. As Table 1 illustrates, seventeen (17) of the 25 countries ranked in the top 25 use a PR system; five (5) use a mixed system and two (3) use a plurality/majority system. Of the top ten countries with the highest number of women in national parliaments, only one (Cuba) uses a plurality/majority system.

In proportional representation systems, the aim is to consciously translate a party's share of the national or regional votes into a corresponding share of seats in the legislative assembly (Reynolds 2006). The basic idea behind the PR electoral system is that it will better reflect opinions and interests of the electorate, and thus makes for fairer and broader representation, which will then result in responsiveness, legitimacy and order. For Lijphart (2008), "the beauty of PR is that in addition

to producing proportionality and minority representation, it treats all groups—ethnic, racial, religious, or even non-communal groups—in a completely equal and evenhanded fashion. Why deviate from full PR at all?” (p. 79).

While PR electoral systems are considered superior to single-member plurality systems in representing women, not all PR systems are equally preferred or will increase representation for women. There are certain features of some PR systems that make them more representative than others. The ability of a PR electoral system to effectively and fairly translate the votes cast in an election into seats in the legislative assembly depends to a large extent on whether there is a large district and party magnitude; whether it uses a List PR (closed or open list) system; how candidates are nominated and selected; or whether it facilitates strategies aimed at including more women in the legislative assembly.

Most proportional representation systems have consistently higher district magnitudes, which lead to higher party magnitudes.<sup>1</sup> PR systems with high district magnitudes are important because they affect party strategy when choosing candidates. There is general agreement in the literature on PR systems and district magnitudes that when a party pulls candidates from deeper in their lists, women (and ethnic minorities) have a greater likelihood of winning seats (Norris 2006; Matland and Brown 1992; Rule 1987). While women are often placed lower on a party list, there is still a greater chance for them to be elected as the party goes further down the party list in an attempt to fill all of its seats. In a study on twenty-three (23) parliamentary democracies using proportional representation, Rule (1987) found that List PR systems, in particular those with large district magnitudes, were very important in women gaining greater representation. The Nordic countries, which were the most successful at electing women, had a wide range of district magnitudes; for instance, Finland had an average of thirteen (13) candidates per district; Sweden—an average of 12; Denmark—an average of 10; and Norway had district magnitude ranges from two to 16 seats, giving an average of seven (Rule 1987, p. 491). Lijphart (1999) in a study of thirty-six (36) democracies from 1945 to 1996 also found that the average electoral disproportionality<sup>2</sup> under PR systems ranged from 1.30 to 8.15, while in majoritarian systems, it ranged from 9.26 to 21.08.

While district magnitudes are considered crucial for the election and selection of women, party magnitudes are also of great importance. If women and minorities are to win seats in parliament, parties have to win several seats, and it is only as the number of seats per district increases that parties will go further down their lists to help fill those seats. Because higher district magnitudes allow for a longer party candidate list, it also makes it easier for political parties to consider all social groups when constructing the party list (Norris 2006). The visibility of the list of candidates

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<sup>1</sup>District magnitude is the number of seats per district; party magnitude is the number of seats a party wins in a district.

<sup>2</sup>Electoral disproportionality is the difference between the percentage of votes received and the percentage of seats a party gets in the resulting legislature.

under a PR system provides further incentive for parties to present a list representing the social, demographic and economic make-up of the electorate (Bird 2003).

Parties in PR elections have greater incentive to balance their nominations with a larger proportion of women and minorities because the system requires that they present to the public a full slate of candidates to potentially fill all available seats within a district. Single-member electoral districts, on the other hand, make it more difficult for parties to include all social groups (Matland and Brown 1992). In single-member districts, the selection process is often in the hands of the local constituency party, and each party can only nominate one person per district. Furthermore, only the candidate with the plurality or majority of the votes will be elected. As a result of this, "there is little or no incentive for each constituency to pick candidates that will produce a balanced ticket at the [regional or] national level" (Bird 2003, p. 13). Bogdanor (1984), argues for instance that:

For whereas under a single-member constituency system it is the presence of a candidate who deviates from the identikit norm (whether female or minority) that is noticed, in a party list system it is the absence of a woman or a minority candidate, the failure to present a balanced ticket, that will be commented upon and resented. (p. 115)

Nomination under single-member (plurality/majority) districts is often classified as a 'zero-sum' game where one person's gain is another person's loss. If a male and a female candidate compete for a party's nomination, a victory for the woman means a loss for the man (and vice versa). When nominating candidates for an election in single-member districts, a party can exclude women and then justify it by arguing that they chose the best person for the job (oftentimes, this candidate is a male).

The opposite applies under PR nominations which can be considered a 'positive sum' game" where one candidate's gain is everyone's gain (Matland 1991). It is often in the interest of the party under PR list systems to ensure that instead of looking for the "best" candidate who can appeal to a broad range of voters, they can instead put forward different candidates who can then appeal to a specific subsector of voters. By attracting voters without a male candidate having to step aside, a female candidate can be seen as beneficial to the party as would happen in single-member districts. A failure to nominate women can also have an adverse effect for political parties as it could drive away voters (Matland 2005). Nominations are usually centralized on a party list and an obvious lack of female candidates is easily apparent, and can be perceived as discriminatory; this may be an electoral liability for that party. There is also greater transparency under List PR systems than plurality/majority systems. The absence and position of women and minorities on the party list is more evident under a List PR system than it is if they were to be nominated under plurality/majority systems.

PR electoral systems tend to lower the barriers to smaller parties, and this has benefit for ethno-political parties, women and other underrepresented group attempting to enter the legislative assembly. Parties determine who will be elected since they choose the candidates, and may place them in a safe and prominent

position on the party lists. There are generally more women and minorities in small parties<sup>3</sup>; women are especially more likely to hold positions in these parties, and as mentioned earlier, large parties see smaller parties putting forward women and minorities and attracting votes, and they follow suit (Matland and Studlar 1996). The latter is what Matland and Studlar (1996) refer to as the macro-contagion effect.<sup>4</sup> The reasoning behind the macro-contagion effect is that smaller parties try to differentiate themselves by actively promoting women and minorities in their parties. Larger parties then feel compelled to do more to actively promote women.

Another feature of PR electoral systems that helps to determine the level of representation and inclusivity 'enjoyed' by women is whether or not a closed or open list system is used in the selection process. An open list will allow voters more leeway in determining not just which parties win seats but how a party's parliamentary caucus looks (which can lead either to a progressive or conservative outcome).<sup>5</sup> Electors can vote for individuals and are able to change the position of candidates on lists. Closed systems on the other hand mean that voters are restricted to voting for the whole list of candidates who have already been ranked in order, and whose names may, or may not, appear on the ballot paper. Voters in closed systems are not able to change the order in which the candidates have been ranked.

Open lists are often considered superior to closed lists because they offer voters more choice and control over who is elected. However, there is no guarantee that open list systems will result in the election of more women. Voters are able to alter the composition of the ballot, and so might vote in favour of a well-known male or popular candidate, thus electing fewer women. It can also prove very difficult to convince voters to vote for women once they are on the list. In an open list system, voters are given more input over who they vote for, and consequently, what happens to their votes. There is therefore no certainty that they will vote for women during an election. In a closed list system, parties are usually forced to take steps to elect more women and other traditionally under-represented groups. Placing women in prominent positions on the party list is not only fair and representative, but also very strategic. One concern that is often raised about closed lists is that party elites usually try to balance their list by choosing candidates to represent all major geographical areas, social and political groups. However, in the process of doing so, many good candidates may be dropped from consideration because they do not meet the various balancing criteria.

The List PR system used in South Africa serves as a good example of how a closed party-list can enhance representation for women. South Africa, under apartheid, used a first-past-the-post system for elections to the national parliament. Under this system there was a vivid underrepresentation of small political parties,

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<sup>3</sup>Minor parties are often considered a "safe haven" for women and minorities.

<sup>4</sup>Macro-contagion is a process where a party responds to general political pressure from competing parties on the issue of representation by increasing its promotion of women across constituencies.

<sup>5</sup>On closed party lists, the party determines the rank order of candidates. On open party lists, the voters are able to influence which of the party's candidates are elected via personal voting.

women (white women included), Indians and coloured (Britton 2008). Not only were members from one or more of these groups prevented from voting or getting elected to the legislative assembly, they were also discriminated against and segregated based on racial grounds.

Today the National Assembly in South Africa is selected through a multi-member district closed List PR system. There are 400 members of the National Assembly; 200 seats are drawn from regional (provincial) lists and 200 from national lists. In an election, voters are presented with a list of parties and individual candidates who were predetermined by the parties themselves. Women have especially benefitted from the closed List PR system in South Africa. After apartheid ended in the 1990s, women held only 3 % of the seats in the lower House of Parliament. After the first national election under PR in 1994, women gained over 26 % of the seats in the National Assembly. This number continued to increase, reaching 29 % in 1999 and 32.8 % in 2004 (Britton 2008, p. 116). By 2014, women comprised 40 % of the total MPs in Parliament. As of May 2016, women in South Africa make up 42 % of Parliament. The number of women in South Africa's National Assembly increased because their numbers also increased at the party level. When Nelson Mandela was elected President of the African National Congress (ANC) in 1994, 32 % of the candidates on the national party lists were women. In the 1999 national elections, women comprised 30 % of the winners (Britton 2008). In 2009, women held 44 % of the 264 seats held by the ANC; by 2014, they occupied 46 % of the 249 ANC seats. The use of closed lists in proportional representation (PR) electoral systems can be credited in part for increasing the number of women in the South Africa's National Assembly. South Africa still has a lot of work to do before there is true gender parity but through a closed List PR system, women have been able to make gains in areas that were once out of bounds to them.

PR systems also pose fewer barriers to the implementation of representative strategies aimed at increasing numerical representation for women in parliament. These measures include but are not limited to: reserved seats, re-districting and quotas. Special selection strategies can and have been used under plurality/majority electoral systems, but they can be harder to implement. In New Zealand, special seats have been reserved for Māori representatives in the House of Representatives. Electoral seats have also been reserved for indigenous groups in Lebanon, Fiji, Zimbabwe and India. Reserved seats are also used in countries such as Uganda, Pakistan, India, Rwanda and Bangladesh to ensure the election of more women to parliament.

Quotas are especially used by countries to increase the number of women in legislative assemblies. The most prominent methods are quotas through constitution or national legislation, and quotas through political parties and seat reservations. The idea behind a quota system is that only when a certain percentage of women are present in a political institution will those women be able 'to act' for women as a group. Most quota systems today aim at ensuring that women present at least a critical minority of 30–40 %. The Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) global database on quotas for women lists 128 countries as having

constitutional, electoral or political party quotas. On average, women hold 22.8 % of parliamentary seats in countries with quotas (IDEA 2015). Of the 128 countries recognized by the IDEA as using some form of quota system, at least 67 use a List PR or mixed system. As previously noted, countries using a List PR or mixed electoral system also boast some of the highest numbers of women in parliament. Rwanda is an example of a country that uses electoral quotas as a means of creating gender balance in politics. In Rwanda, women make up 63.8 % of the legislative assembly. Rwanda is also ranked number one out of 193 countries with the highest number of women in national parliaments (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2016).

While it is evident in the literature on electoral systems and representation that women are better represented numerically under 'pure' PR systems, more recently, countries seeking electoral reform have turned to mixed or hybrid electoral systems. Mixed electoral systems which have become popular over the past few decades are similar to other forms of PR systems in that the overall total of party members in the elected body is intended to mirror the overall proportion of votes received. The difference lies in the way by which they include a set of members elected by geographic constituency and who are deducted from the party totals so as to maintain an overall proportionality (Shugart and Wattenberg 2001). As a proportional representation system, the Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) ensures that voters' party preferences are proportionally reflected in the party composition of parliament. The MMP, as used in countries like New Zealand and Germany is considered a mixed or hybrid system because:

The choices expressed by the voters are used to elect representatives through two different systems: one List PR system and (usually) one plurality/majority system, where the List PR system compensates for the disproportionality in the results from the plurality/majority system. (Ellis 2005, p. 11)

By combining the distinctive representational features of plurality/majority and PR, MMP can achieve the 'best of both worlds'—it can harness the benefits of minority representation indicative of its PR component, while maintaining levels of geographic representation and accountability inherent in plurality/majority systems. Legislators elected in single-member districts tend to be more responsive to local interests, while representatives from proportional representation (PR) lists respond to the broader interests of the party. Due to its ability to shift the balance of power between the executive and legislative branches of government, MMP can be an attractive option for countries seeking electoral reform. According to Malone (Malone 2009), "the ability of the executive to achieve satisfactory legislative outcomes no longer relies on an inherent ability to dominate a single government caucus" (p. 5). This has greater implications for women's substantive representation in the legislative assembly. With a wider range of representatives being able to get into parliament, different viewpoints will be discussed on important issues.

In summary, PR systems leads to more representation for women. This is primarily because parties can be encouraged to craft a balanced party list, reflecting the wide range of interests, social and demographical make-up of the wider society. A balanced list of candidates can also appeal to a wider spectrum of voters' interests

(Reynolds et al. 2005). As noted earlier, in single-member districts, parties usually put up the 'most broadly acceptable' candidate and that candidate is usually never a woman or visible minority. Unless women form a majority in a district, it is not likely that a big party would nominate a female representative to run for the seat. Under List PR systems parties must indicate to the entire electorate that their party lists are representative and inclusive, both ideologically and demographically.

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