

Women in Politics in Latin America¹

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Introduction

Women's participation in national-level politics in Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking Latin America has increased steadily since the 1980s, when most countries in the region democratised. As of June 2020, women comprised about 30 percent of the region's legislatures. Countries with statutory gender quotas elect more women in general, and all Latin American countries save Guatemala and Venezuela use quota laws for congressional elections. Eight countries currently enforce gender parity, meaning that parties must nominate men and women in equal numbers for all legislative positions. In Mexico, Bolivia, and Ecuador, gender parity governs the composition of the entire government, meaning the executive, legislative, and judicial branches at the national and subnational levels, including in the indigenous territories. Overall, gender quota laws' popularity reflects the consolidation of norms that demand governments take positive action to increase women's political presence.²

Women's growing presence in power has translated into greater legislative activity on women's rights, leading to policy changes that combat violence against women, expand reproductive rights, improve social

¹ An earlier version of this brief was co-authored with Mala Htun and Sophia von Bergen. Elizabeth Brewer provided research assistance for this version.

² Jennifer M. Piscopo, "States as Gender Equality Activists: The Evolution of Quota Laws in Latin America," *Latin American Politics and Society* 57, no. 3 (2015): 27-49.

services, and extend the reach of gender quotas.³ Notwithstanding these gains, women politicians continue to report sexist practices within political parties, recently calling attention to the gender-based harassment faced by women on the campaign trail and in elected office. To combat these and other obstacles and to increase their political clout, women legislators in many Latin American countries have formed women's caucuses in parliament and forged links with feminist organisations and civil society groups.

Women in the Executive

A significant number of Latin American countries have elected women chief executives. Latin America's first elected female presidents – both widows of prominent political figures – emerged in Central America: Violeta Chamorro in Nicaragua (1990-1994) and Mireya Moscoso in Panama (1999-2004). A more recent wave of women presidents attained office through their own professional and political credentials, including Michelle Bachelet of Chile (2006-2010 and 2014-2018), Cristina Fernández de Kirchner of Argentina (2007-2015), Laura Chinchilla of Costa Rica (2010-2014), and Dilma Rousseff of Brazil (2011-2016). Rousseff was the most recent woman to win a presidential contest, when she secured reelection in 2014 – only to be impeached two years later for corruption. In fact, women presidents have faced greater censure for corruption when compared to men presidents, even when their performances have been similar.⁴ Higher standards remain one of the significant headwinds Latin American women face when seeking executive office.

³ Merike Blofield, Christina Ewig, and Jennifer M. Piscopo, "The Reactive Left: Gender Equality and the Latin American Pink Tide," *Social Politics* 24, no. 4 (2017): 345-369; Susan Franceschet and Jennifer M. Piscopo, "Quotas and Women's Substantive Representation: Lessons from Argentina," *Politics and Gender* 4, no. 3 (2008): 393-425; Mala Htun, Marina Lacalle, and Juan Pablo Micozzi, "Does Women's Presence Change Legislative Behavior? Evidence from Argentina, 1983-2007," *Journal of Politics in Latin America* 5, no. 1 (2013): 95-125; Mala Htun, Cheryl O'Brien, and S. Laurel Weldon, "Movilización feminista y políticas sobre violencia contra las mujeres" [Violence against women: Feminist mobilization and politics], *Foreign Affairs Latinoamérica* 14, no. 1 (2014): 2-13; Leslie Schwandt-Bayer, *Gender and Representation in Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁴ Catherine Reyes-Housholder, "A Theory of Gender's Role on Presidential Approval Ratings in Corrupt Times," *Political Research Quarterly* (2019): <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912919838626>.

Women's share of cabinet positions keeps growing. In 2000, women composed 10 percent of ministers in South America and 16 percent in Mexico and Central America; by 2010, these figures increased to 22 percent and 21 percent, respectively.⁵ In 2020, women held 28 percent of all ministerial portfolios in the region, though this average obscures significant national variation.⁶ Women comprised over half the cabinet in Nicaragua, and over 40 percent of the cabinets in Costa Rica, Colombia, and Mexico. By contrast, Argentina, Brazil, Guatemala, Honduras, and Panama had 20 percent or fewer women (usually two or three women). The Dominican Republic had only one, and she held the portfolio of Minister of Women.

Current cabinet appointments have occurred under men presidents, given the absence of women presidents. However, back when women held the presidencies, they did not always do better. For example, during their first terms, Chile's Bachelet appointed a parity cabinet, but Argentina's Fernández de Kirchner appointed a mere 20 percent women. An emerging trend is presidents promising parity cabinets, from Bachelet in Chile to, more recently, the men presidents of Costa Rica, Colombia, and Nicaragua. Generally, regional norms now prevent presidents from having all-male cabinets, though male dominance of cabinet persists.⁷

When women presidents do increase women's appointment to cabinet, they tend to appoint women to stereotypically feminine portfolios.⁸ This gendered distribution of cabinet portfolios occurs with men selectors as well. In other words, women ministers' increased access to cabinet largely occurs via the less prestigious, "soft" portfolios, such as social

⁵ Mala Htun and Jennifer M. Piscopo, "Women in Politics and Policy in Latin America and the Caribbean," Working Paper Series No. 2, Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum (Social Sciences and Research Council, 2014).

⁶ 2020 data from the United States Central Intelligence Agency World Leaders Database (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/world-leaders-1/>). Cabinet counts include attorney generals and chiefs of staff. Note that, in November 2019, a political crisis forced out the Evo Morales government in Bolivia and interim leaders came to power. Cabinet counts refer to the deposed Morales cabinet.

⁷ Michelle M. Taylor Robinson and Meredith P. Gletiz, "Women in Presidential Cabinets: Getting into the Elite Club?" in *Gender and Representation in Latin America*, ed. Leslie Schwindt-Bayer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 39-55.

⁸ Catherine Reyes-Housholder, "Presidentas Rise: Consequences for Women in Cabinets?" *Latin American Politics and Society* 58, no. 3 (2018): 3-25.

services, education, tourism, culture, and housing.⁹ Women are less likely to administer the “hard” domains of economy, finance, justice, defence, security, and foreign affairs. In 2020, two women served as ministers of defence or security, four as ministers of foreign relations, five as ministers of finance or the economy, and seven as ministers of justice or as their country’s attorney general. Notably, some countries with few women in cabinet – Argentina, Guatemala, Honduras, and Panama – all had at least one woman holding a hard portfolio. Honduras had three women in these prestigious posts, with women managing justice, foreign affairs, and finance.

These trends show that women are gaining ground in the executive branch, and slowly conquering spaces typically reserved for men leaders. Though no women occupied the presidency in 2020, women have been viable contenders in many recent presidential elections.¹⁰ For instance, Sandra Torres of Guatemala finished in second place in the 2019 elections. Ten women served as vice president in 2020, including the first Afro-descendant woman, Costa Rica’s Epsy Campbell Barr. Costa Rican women actually enjoy a long tradition of holding the vice presidency: Costa Rica has two vice-presidents and the gender parity law for nominating legislative candidates also applies to nominating the two vice presidential candidates (one must be a man and one must be a woman).

Finally, other mechanisms exist to promote women within the executive branch. As noted, gender parity governs the composition of the executive branch in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Mexico. In Colombia, a 30 percent gender quota has been applied to the highest positions in the executive branch at all government levels since 2000.

Women in National Legislatures

Women’s presence in national office shows similar increases in recent decades. In the 1990s, women’s seat share in the region’s lower or unicameral

⁹ Maria C. Escobar-Lemmon and Michelle M. Taylor-Robinson, *Women in Presidential Cabinets: Power Players or Abundant Tokens* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹⁰ Catherine Reyes-Housholder and Gwynn Thomas, “Latin America’s *Presidentas*: Overcoming Challenges, Forging New Pathways,” in *Gender and Representation in Latin America*, ed. Leslie Schwandt-Bayer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 19-38.

houses averaged below 10 percent; in 2005, it neared 20 percent and by 2015, it had climbed to 30 percent.¹¹ As of June 2020, women's presence averaged 30 percent in the lower or unicameral house and 28 percent in the Senate. These strong numbers are driven by the adoption of gender quotas, statutory mechanisms – constitutional amendments or laws – requiring that women make up a certain percentage of each political party's candidates in the legislative elections.

In 1991, Argentina adopted the world's first contemporary quota law, requiring that political parties run 30 percent women for the lower house. By 2020, all Latin American countries – save Guatemala and Venezuela – had adopted quota laws for their national legislatures.¹² Nine countries in the region have now adopted gender parity, either raising their quota threshold to 50 percent or adopting parity outright: Argentina, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama and Peru. Initially, Peru's parity law was progressive, beginning with 40 percent in the 2021 elections, increasing to 45 percent in 2026 and finally to 50 percent in 2031, but women lawmakers successfully lobbied to eliminate the gradual implementation, securing gender parity rules for the 2021 elections. The remaining countries apply thresholds below parity: 20 percent in Paraguay; 30 percent in Brazil, Colombia, and El Salvador; 33 percent in Uruguay; and 40 percent in Chile and the Dominican Republic.

Quotas' numerical effects are uneven across countries. In addition to the variation in thresholds, quotas' ability to translate nominations into seats depends on the electoral system. Gender quotas combine best with closed-list proportional representation electoral systems. In these systems, political parties present rank-ordered slates of candidates that voters cannot reorder. Candidates are elected from this closed list in proportion to the percentage of votes received by the party, following their order on the list. The higher a candidate places on the list, the more likely she is to win a seat. Since parties usually seek to comply minimally with quotas, rules are needed that prevent parties from filling quotas but

¹¹ Leslie Schwindt-Bayer and Santiago Alles, "Women in Legislatures: Gender, Institutions, and Democracy," in *Gender and Representation in Latin America*, ed. Leslie Schwindt-Bayer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 56-73.

¹² In Venezuela, the electoral management body does apply a fifty percent quota when evaluating party lists.

placing women in the unelectable positions.¹³ The most numerically successful quota laws therefore contain placement mandates for electoral lists. For a thirty percent quota, a typical placement mandate requires that one woman has to appear every three names; for gender parity, the standard is alternating men and women down the list (called vertical parity).

In addition to placement mandates, effective quota laws need other rules that eliminate parties' ability to nominate, but not actually elect, women. In Mexico, for instance, the electoral law prohibits parties from sending women exclusively to losing districts.¹⁴ In Brazil, by contrast, the fact that parties can nominate more candidates than winnable seats works against the quota's effectiveness, allowing parties to run numerous non-viable candidates.¹⁵ Countries must also empower their electoral management bodies to enforce quotas, imposing sanctions on political parties for non-compliance. Typically, parties submitting candidate lists that do not comply with quota rules must resubmit, or not compete in the election.

Countries with the strongest quota laws – meaning those that have gender parity combined with placement mandates and additional enforcement mechanisms – elect the most women. Comparing those with the strongest quotas (Argentina, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua) to the remainder (weak quota or no quota) reveals a significant difference in women's election to the unicameral or lower chamber: 42 percent in the strong quota cases, and 22 percent in the weak quota or no quota cases.

Overall, gender quota laws have become increasing popular ways to increase women's access to political power in Latin America, as evidenced by application of quotas to the legislative and the executive branches. Additionally, some countries have adopted gender quotas for civil society associations. Argentina has applied a 30 percent quota for trade union directorates since 2001. Costa Rica has enforced gender parity for the

¹³ Htun and Piscopo, "Women in Politics and Policy," 2014.

¹⁴ Jennifer M. Piscopo, "Leveraging Informality, Rewriting Formal Rules: The Implementation of Gender Parity in Mexico," in *Gender and Informal Institutions*, ed. Georgina Waylen (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 137-160.

¹⁵ Kristin Wylie, *Party Institutionalization and Women's Representation in Democratic Brazil* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

boards of all registered non-profits since 2011, from traditionally feminine organisations such as charities to traditionally masculine groups such as sports leagues. Overall, gender quotas are popular policy tools used to gender public space and facilitate women's access to government, from legislatures to other types of public offices.¹⁶

From Presence to Power

Does women's greater presence in power lead to policy outcomes more favourable to women's rights? Women's inclusion does not automatically change the substantive activity of representation. While women presidents may enjoy more concentrated and unilateral policy authority, women legislators engage in the complex and often collaborative tasks of raising consciousness, introducing bills and amendments, lobbying, and voting.

Among women presidents, Bachelet of Chile stands out as the most vocal supporter of women's rights. During her first term, she expanded Chilean women's access to contraception, passed laws that protected working mothers from employment discrimination, and strengthened the executive branch's women's policy agency.¹⁷ In her second term, she spearheaded an ambitious electoral reform that included a 40 percent gender quota and oversaw the liberalisation of abortion in cases of sexual assault, fetal impairment, or danger to the mother's health or life.¹⁸ Even women presidents who eschewed the "feminist" label, such as Fernández in Argentina and Chinchilla in Costa Rica, still implemented policies that benefited women. Chinchilla's signature programme established elder and childcare centres throughout the country, which facilitated women's ability

¹⁶ Piscopo, "States as Gender Equality Activists," 2015.

¹⁷ Susan Franceschet, "Informal Institutions and Women's Representation in Chile (1990-2015)," in *Gender and Representation in Latin America*, ed. Leslie Schwindt-Bayer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 140-155.

¹⁸ Franceschet, "Informal Institutions and Women's Representation in Chile, 2018.

to pursue paid employment.¹⁹ Fernández likewise implemented many policies that benefited working-class and poor women.²⁰

Whether women change policies to benefit women is a question more commonly studied with respect to the legislative branch. Latin American women legislators indeed influence policy. For instance, women's increased presence in the Argentine Congress led to increased bill introduction activity on women's rights from both women and men.²¹ Women in the Costa Rican assembly have introduced women's perspectives on a range of issues, from discussing how fighting crime and combating corruption benefits mothers and families, to pushing for more women judicial nominees.²²

Women lawmakers still face obstacles transforming their initiatives and their agendas into policy, however. Women's rights advocates in the Argentine Congress report having their efforts diminished by men party leaders, and bills related to women's rights are more than twice as likely to fail as other types of bills.²³ Importantly, policy change depends not just on women legislators and their cultivation of male allies in the chamber, but on presidential support, party organisations, and pressure from civil groups.²⁴

Earlier studies on women legislators' influence documented their diminished presence on important legislative committees and their near-absence among presidents and vice-presidents of the chamber itself.²⁵ However, these patterns are slowly changing, thanks largely to increases in quota laws' thresholds: as women legislators become more numerous,

¹⁹ Farida Jalalzai, *Women Presidents of Latin America: Beyond Family Ties* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 233-235.

²⁰ Tiffany D. Barnes and Mark P. Jones, "Women's Political Representation in Argentina," in *Gender and Representation in Latin America*, ed. Leslie Schwindt-Bayer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 121-139.

²¹ Htun, Lacalle, and Miccozi, "Does Women's Presence Change Legislative Behavior," 2013.

²² Magda Hinojosa, Jill Carle, and Gina Serignese Woodall, "Speaking as a Woman: Descriptive Representation and Representation in Costa Rica's Legislative Assembly," *Journal of Women, Politics, and Policy* 39, no. 4 (2018): 407-429.

²³ Franceschet and Piscopo, "Quotas and Women's Substantive Representation," 2008.

²⁴ Blofield, Ewig, and Piscopo, "The Reactive Left," 2017.

²⁵ Leslie Schwindt-Bayer, *Political Power and Women's Representation in Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

party leaders cannot isolate them all on the low status, feminised committees, like housing and health. Mexico recently modified its internal rules to require that all legislative committees also have gender parity. In the past decade, women have presided over the assembly in Costa Rica and in Ecuador.

Overall, women's ascendance to political office in Latin America coincided with a period of progressive legal change. Eleven of the eighteen Latin American countries elected left-wing governments to power between 1998 and 2015. Latin American countries also expressed their commitment to women's rights through international treaties and agreements, including the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women (1994), and the Quito Consensus on gender parity (2007). These international conventions help feminist activists fight for stronger laws in all areas, from violence against women to gender quotas. Equally important are regional networks and conferences that allow Latin American feminists to meet and strategise across national boundaries.²⁶

Still, much work remains to make gender equality the reality in law and in practice. Gender-based violence is a serious problem throughout the region. Most countries have strong laws to prevent and punish offenders, but they are not usually enforced, leading to underreporting and impunity.²⁷ Gender-based violence follows women into political office, with increasing numbers of women candidates and women legislators coming forward to denounce sexual harassment and even physical assaults from their male co-partisans.²⁸ Race and class also affect all aspects of women's lives, from living free of violence to running for and holding office. Indigenous women and Afro-descendant women face not just sexism, but racism. They are

²⁶ Elisabeth Jay Freidman, "Re(gion)alizing Women's Human Rights in Latin America," *Politics & Gender* 5, no. 3 (2009): 349-375; Conny Roggeband, "Ending Violence against Women in Latin America: Feminist Norm Setting in a Multilevel Context," *Politics & Gender* 12, no. 1 (2016): 143-167.

²⁷ Htun, O'Brien, and Weldon, "Movilización feminista," 2014.

²⁸ Edmé R. Domínguez and Marcia Pacheco O., "Beyond Parity in Figures: The Challenges and Reality of Municipal Women Councilors in Bolivia," *Iberoamericana* 47, no. 1 (2018): 1-12; Mona Lena Krook and Juliana Restrepo Sanín, "Gender and Political Violence in Latin America: Concepts, Debates, and Solutions," *Política y Gubernativo* 32, no. 1 (2016): 129-164.

dramatically underrepresented in elected office relative to their presence in the population, even though their voices are urgently needed.²⁹ In Bolivia, for example, it was indigenous women legislators who ensured that the pension reform included informal workers, many of whom are women and indigenous.³⁰

Strengthening Women's Political Power

Scholars and activists have focused their attention on two institutions that can improve women lawmakers' access, voice, and power: standing committees with policy remits addressing women or gender and women's caucuses or other forms of women's networks.³¹ Other initiatives include incentives, like candidate training programmes for women, designed to reduce party leaders' bias against women candidates.

Legislative standing committees participate in the policymaking process by revising and amending legislation and by monitoring the executive. Most Latin American legislatures have a standing committee charged with reviewing policy proposals that affect women. An inverse correlation exists between these gender equality committees and the participation of men legislators: when the committee name uses the words "women" or "gender" rather than "family" and "children", fewer men are members (though norms about gender parity in committee appointments are gradually shifting this balance).³²

Unlike standing committees, women's caucuses do not have formal policy roles. Caucuses are cross-partisan networks of female legislators

²⁹ Jennifer M. Piscopo and Kristin Wylie, "Gender, Race, and Political Representation in Latin America," in *Encyclopedia of Latin American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.ORE_POL-01745.R1; Wylie, *Party Institutionalization*, 2018.

³⁰ Christina Ewig, "Forging Women's Substantive Representation: Intersectional Interests, Political Parity, and Pensions in Bolivia," *Politics & Gender* 14, no. 3 (2018): 433-459.

³¹ Keila Gonzalez and Kirsten Sample, "One Size Does Not Fit All: Lessons Learned from Legislative Gender Commissions and Caucuses," (Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2010); Jennifer M. Piscopo, "Committees and Caucuses: How Legislative Institutions Shape Substantive Representation in Latin America," (International Political Science Association: Montreal, 2014); Piscopo, "Leveraging Informality," 2017.

³² Piscopo, "Committees and Caucuses," 2014.

that unite women based on their identity and serve as important institutional spaces in otherwise male-dominated legislatures.³³ In 2015, Chile, Colombia, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, El Salvador, and Uruguay all had women's caucuses. Though caucuses vary in terms of their profile, organisation, and resources, all have a policy agenda that expresses progressive policy goals.³⁴

Caucuses are only one type of network formed by women politicians. Other networks draw former and current legislators together, like Panama's National Forum of Women in Political Parties, which successfully lobbied the electoral management body for better quota enforcement.³⁵ Gender equality observatories are another type of network, in which elected officials, state officials, lawyers, journalists, and feminist activists unite to monitor state compliance with particular gender equality laws. Observatories can mobilise quickly to denounce violations and abuse. Usually, they focus on violence against women or women's political rights. The latter are found in Mexico, Bolivia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, and Paraguay. Mexico's Observatory for the Promotion of Women's Political Rights helped the National Electoral Institute monitor parties' compliance with the gender parity mandate in the 2015 and 2018 elections, and Bolivia's Observatory of Parity Democracy has documented and denounced gender-based violence against women candidates.³⁶

Beyond the legislature, Latin American countries have adopted other policy tools designed to promote women within the political parties and to facilitate their political careers.³⁷ Most gender quotas also apply to parties' governing boards. More recently, Latin America's election laws have

³³ Niki Johnson and Cecilia Josefsson, "A New Way of Doing Politics? Cross-Party Women's Caucuses as Critical Actors in Uganda and Uruguay," *Representation* 69, no. 4 (2016): 845-859.

³⁴ Piscopo, "Committees and Caucuses," 2014.

³⁵ Jennifer M. Piscopo, "Cómo los observatorios promueven el cumplimiento de los derechos políticos de las mujeres" [How Observatories Promote the Fulfillment of Women's Political Rights], *Oraculos Blog*, March 28, 2019.

³⁶ Piscopo, "Cómo los observatorios promueven," 2019.

³⁷ Jana Morgan and Magda Hinojosa, "Women in Political Parties; Seen But Not Heard," in *Gender and Representation in Latin America*, ed. Leslie Schwindt-Bayer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 74-98.

tackled the question of money. In Latin America, political parties are publicly financed, and parties distribute state funds to candidates. In Chile, the electoral law gives parties a financial bonus for each woman elected, and reimburses women candidates for their expenses at higher rates than men candidates. Brazil, Costa Rica, Colombia, Honduras, Mexico, and Panama require that parties set aside portions of their budget to train women candidates. Many private or civil society organisations also offer candidate training for women, with the stated purpose of combating party leaders' oft-heard lament that "there are no women" to nominate.³⁸ Taken together, these initiatives are additional mechanisms designed to help women gain office and to govern effectively once elected.

Conclusion

In Latin America, the adoption and implementation of effective gender quota laws at the national level has increased women's political representation and deepened women's access to political power. Quotas and parity demonstrate and reinforce norms that emphasise the importance of women's presence in government, from the legislature to the cabinet. Indeed, countries throughout Latin America have expanded quotas and parity to the executive branch, the judiciary, the political parties, and civil society. Additionally, women are designing institutions, forming networks, and changing practices, all to influence the passage and implementation of better and stronger gender equality reforms. Women politicians and activists are also raising their voices to denounce the practices that still keep women out of politics, such as gender-based harassment and assault.

The connection between women's presence and their empowerment ultimately depends not only on increasing the proportions of women in political office, but on changing the beliefs, institutions, and practices that structure women politicians' opportunities to act effectively. Policies have changed when domestic and international actors worked together to hold political leaders – whether men or women – accountable for advancing women's rights.

³⁸ Jennifer M. Piscopo, "The Limits of Leaning in: Ambition, Recruitment, and Candidate Training in Comparative Perspective," *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 7, no. 4 (2019): 817-828.