PUBLIC SCHOLARSHIP

What Voters Really Think About Gender Quotas

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What happens to citizens' perceptions of political decisions when legislatures achieve gender balance through quotas, policies that require parties to include women as candidates? Critics have long argued that mandating women's presence casts doubt on elected officials' qualifications and erodes the legitimacy of the decisions they make. Examining public attitudes across 12 democracies, Amanda Clayton, Diana O'Brien, and Jennifer Piscopo find the opposite. Citizens strongly prefer gender-balanced decision-making bodies, and this preference holds even when balance is achieved through quotas. The real threat to democratic legitimacy, they argue, is not affirmative action but the continued exclusion of women from political power.



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Gender quotas have become a common feature of democracies around the world, and surveys suggest they are broadly popular among citizens in many quota-adopting countries. Yet resistance persists, particularly among political elites. Quota skeptics worry that these affirmative action policies constrain voter choice, stigmatize women as less qualified, and ultimately weaken public trust in the decisions made by quota-elected bodies. Against this backdrop, Clayton, O'Brien, and Piscopo designed a study to test whether skeptics' concerns hold.

The study involves survey experiments with over 17,000 respondents across the Americas, Europe, and Australasia. Participants read about a fictional city council that varied in two ways. First, the council's composition differed: some participants read about an all-male council, others about a gender-balanced council with no explanation about how gender balanced was achieved, and others about a gender-balanced council achieved through a rule requiring parties to run equal numbers of male and female candidates. Second, the policy issue under consideration varied between a woman's rights issue and an issue unrelated to women's rights. Participants then evaluated the council's legitimacy.

The results show that across all 12 countries, respondents rated gender-based balanced councils as significantly more legitimate than all-male councils. This preference was held even when participants learned that gender balance resulted from a quota policy. There was a modest "quota penalty," in which respondents view quota-elected councils as slightly less legitimate than gender-based councils achieved without a stated rule. But this penalty is small compared to the legitimacy deficit of all-male bodies. Quotas may carry some stigma, but the penalty is far less than the cost of excluding women entirely.

The quota penalty varied across countries in interesting ways. In countries that mandate gender parity, the penalty was negligible. Citizens in these countries appeared accustomed to quotas as a normal feature of democratic life. The United States and United Kingdom, which lack statutory quotas, showed larger penalties. Even there, however, respondents still preferred quota-elected gender-balanced councils to all-male ones when evaluating procedural fairness.

This cross-national pattern suggests that exposure to quota policies helps shape citizens' acceptance over time. Countries that have debated, adopted, and strengthened quotas have also normalized the idea that gender-balanced representation is a democratic value worth pursuing through institutional design. In countries with higher quota thresholds, citizens were more likely to know that such policies exist, indicating that quota debates enter public consciousness and shift expectations about how legislatures should look like.

The study also examined whether the policy issue under consideration mattered. When councils deliberated on sexual harassment policy, the legitimacy-conferring effects of gender balance were especially pronounced. But even when councils considered an issue unrelated to women's rights, respondents still preferred gender-balanced bodies. Women's presence signals fairness regardless of what decisions are being made.

Clayton, O'Brien, and Piscopo conclude that critics have framed quota debates incorrectly. The choice is not between women elected on their own and women benefiting from preferential treatment. Without quotas, the alternative is rarely gender balance achieved organically but continued male dominance. The real question is whether citizens prefer women's inclusion through institutional design or the persistent over-representation of men. Their findings suggest citizens prefer inclusion. ■

CLAYTON, AMANDA, DIANA Z. O'BRIEN, and JENNIFER M. PISCOPO. 2026. "Electoral Gender Quotas and Democratic Legitimacy." *American Political Science Review*: 120(1) 123–40. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055425000176

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