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Women in politics: why are they under-represented?

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Women in Polish parliamentary elections after 1989

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Abstract

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Women are generally under-represented in political offices worldwide, and their under-representation becomes larger in more senior positions. In this brief I review some recent academic literature in economics and political science on the likely causes of women's under-representation. Broadly speaking, the literature has divided such causes into "supply-side" and "demand-side" factors: the former include women's potentially lower willingness to run for political office, whereas the latter include voters' and party leaders' prejudices against women in politics. Understanding the underlying causes of women's under-representation in political institutions is crucial in order to design the most effective policies to address the existing gender gaps. In concluding I summarize some of the policies that have been proposed or used to empower women in politics and review the evidence on their effectiveness when available.

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As is the case across Central Europe and Central Asia, women have been historically under-represented in Polish politics. In the context of other European countries, Poland performs poorly across various measures of gender equality, especially in women's political empowerment. The government attempted to address this deficit in 2011 by implementing gender quotas for electoral lists. Still, despite an increase in the number of female candidates, there remain disproportionately few female MPs. In part, this can be attributed to conservative values and gender bias among voters. However, a far more significant role is played by the bias of political parties, which have the capacity to keep women out of the top positions on electoral lists. Thus, the implementation of gender quotas for the candidates running in elections has not been a sufficient measure to overcome barriers to women's inclusion in decision-making political positions and a more comprehensive approach is necessary. On the one hand, changes in social attitudes are essential, however they should come along some further legal developments such as gender-related requirement for proportion of candidates in top positions of electoral lists.



Women in politics: why are they under-represented?

Women are generally under-represented in political offices worldwide, and their under-representation becomes larger in more senior positions. Of the four dimensions considered in the World Economic Forum's Gender Equality Index (namely, Economic Opportunity and Participation, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival and Political Empowerment), the dimension called Political Empowerment, which measures the extent to which women are represented in political office, records the poorest performance, with only 25% of an hypothetical 100% gap having been closed to date.

Importantly, although there is large variation across countries, gender inequality in political empowerment is documented in every region worldwide, including in those countries that are most socially and economically advanced. Sweden, for instance, while having a good record of women's representation in most institutions (women currently represent 47.5% of the Parliament members, 54.5% of the ministers, and about 43% of the municipal councillors), has never had a woman as Prime minister, and only one third of its mayors are female. Countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia have only closed 15% of an hypothetical 100% gender gap in political empowerment, according to the World Economic Forum, by far their worst performance among the four sub-indexes that compose the overall Gender Equality Index.

Given the persistent under-representation of women in political institutions, where important decisions that shape societies are taken, economists and political scientists, among others, are increasingly interested in understanding the causes of the gender gap in political

representation. In this brief I summarize some of the recent academic literature on this question, and I review some policies that may help closing the gender gaps in political representation.

Table 1. World Economic Forum Gender Equality Index. Regional Performance in 2020, by Sub-index

	Overall	Econ. Participation and Opportunity	Educational Attainment	Health and Survival	Political Empowerment
Western Europe	0.767	0.693	0.993	0.972	0.409
North America	0.729	0.756	1.000	0.975	0.184
Latin America and the Caribbean	0.721	0.642	0.996	0.979	0.269
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	0.715	0.732	0.998	0.979	0.150
East Asia and the Pacific	0.685	0.663	0.976	0.943	0.159
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.680	0.666	0.872	0.972	0.211
South Asia	0.661	0.365	0.943	0.947	0.387
Middle East and North Africa	0.611	0.425	0.950	0.969	0.102
Global	0.685	0.582	0.957	0.958	0.241

Note: The Global Gender Equality Index tracks countries' progress towards reaching gender equality in educational and health attainment as well as in economic and political life. The overall score is an unweighted average of these four sub-dimensions. A score of 1 corresponds to perfect equality; by contrast, the closer to 0 the score, the larger the gender gap in the respective dimension. The regional average for Eastern Europe and Central Asia is calculated based on the individual scores of the 26 countries. This Table is the authors' own rendering of data taken from the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2020 (WEF, 2019 p.22).

Why are women under-represented in political office?

Broadly speaking, three main reasons are most often explored, namely women's unwillingness



to become politicians, voters' bias, and parties' bias. Below I provide an overview of some of the work that has addressed each of these three factors.

Gender gaps in political ambition

Large-scale surveys have documented that women who, based on their professional and economic credentials, are potential political candidates, report lower ambition to occupy executive offices than comparable men (Fox and Lawless, 2004). The main reasons for the gender gap in ambition appear to be that (a) women are less encouraged to run for office than men and (b) women are less likely to believe that they are qualified for office than men.

Women's tendency to shy away from competition (Niederle and Vesterlund, 2007) may also play a role, since the political selection process is likely perceived as highly competitive. As Preece and Stoddard (2015) find by using two experiments, priming individuals to consider the competitive nature of politics lowers women's interest in running for political office, whereas it has no effect on the interest of men.

Women's willingness to advance in their political career can also be influenced by family and relational considerations. Recent work from Folke and Rickne (2020) shows that in Sweden female politicians who are promoted to mayor (i.e. the highest office in municipal politics) experience a significant increase in the likelihood of divorcing their partner, whereas this is not the case for men. If women face higher costs for their career achievements, as the evidence in Folke and Rickne (2020) suggests, they may be discouraged from pursuing such objectives.

While there is evidence that women may on average be less willing to advance to top positions than men, it is not clear how

quantitatively relevant this factor is to account for the lack of women in power. The introduction of gender quotas in candidate lists in different countries worldwide can be informative in this sense. If women's under-representation in electoral lists is mostly due to the lack of qualified female politicians, some electoral lists (in most cases representing specific political parties) may not be able to run due to the introduction of a quota, and the average "quality" of lists, measured by some relevant (to voters) characteristics of their members, would decrease. The literature finds no evidence of either of these two responses to quotas (see Baltrunaite et al., 2014, Besley et al., 2017, Bagues and Campa, 2020). On the contrary, in Italy (Baltrunaite et al., 2014) and Sweden (Besley et al., 2017) quotas appear to have improved the "quality" of the elected politicians.

Voters' bias

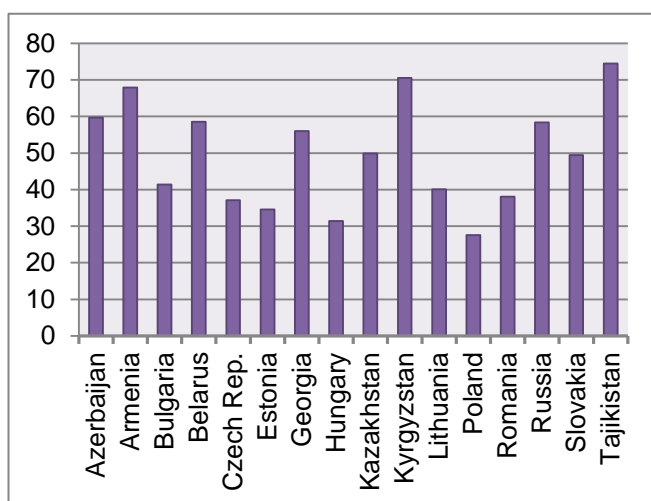
Krook (2018) observes that the existing work in political science regarding the importance of voters' bias in explaining women's underrepresentation in politics leads to ambivalent conclusions. Results in the most recent economics literature confirm this assessment. Barbanchon and Sauvagnat (2019) compare votes received by the same female candidate in French parliamentary elections across different polling stations within an electoral district and find that votes for women are lower in municipalities with more traditional gender-role attitudes. They interpret this pattern as evidence of voters' discrimination and conclude that voters' bias matters quantitatively in explaining women's under-representation among politicians. Conversely, Bagues and Campa (2020) find no evidence of voters bias against women, based on voters' reaction to the introduction of a gender quota for electoral lists in Spain. Specifically, they study how the quota impacts the electoral performance of lists that



were more affected by the quota – i.e. that were forced to increase their share of female candidates by a larger extent, due to their lower level of feminization pre-quota. They do not find evidence that such lists have worsened their relative electoral performance due to the quota. Put differently, there is no evidence that voters lower their electoral support of a list when its share of female candidates increases for exogenous reasons.

Survey data on voters' attitudes can also help in gauging the extent to which voters discriminate against women. Based on data from the latest wave of the World Value Survey (WVS, 2017-2020), in Western Europe typically less than 20% of survey respondents express agreement with the statement *"Men make better political leaders than women do"* (e.g. 5% in Sweden, 9% in Denmark and Germany, 12% in Finland and France, 19% in Italy; only in Greece the share of agreement is higher than 20%, at 26%). As shown in Figure 1, these percentages are substantially higher in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.).

Figure 1. Share of survey respondents who report to "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" with the statement "Men make better political leaders than women do".



Notes: Data are based on the latest wave of the World Value Survey, 2017-2020. The countries selected were either part of the former Soviet Union or under direct Soviet influence before 1990.

It bears noting, however, that answers to the WVS are not always informative about the extent to which voters' bias prevails in a country. Where the percentage of respondents who think that men make better political leaders than women is close to or above 50%, as e.g. in Armenia, Georgia or Russia, voters' bias is likely to be an important factor. However, in countries with lower levels of agreement, such as for instance Poland, drawing conclusions is harder, since the WVS does not measure the share of respondents who think that *women make better political leaders than men do*.

Parties' bias

Party leaders, who often are key players in the selection of politicians, may prefer to promote male rather than female candidates. If they are aware of voters' bias against women, preferring male candidates is consistent with a votes-maximizing strategy. However, party leaders may also act as gate-keepers and hold women back even in absence of voters' bias. Esteve-Volart and Bagues (2012) find evidence of an agency problem between voters and parties by looking at Spanish elections. While parties tend to nominate women in worse positions on the ballot, there is no evidence that women attract fewer votes than men; moreover, when the competition is stiffer, women's position on the ballot improves. These two facts lead the authors to conclude that the disadvantage women face can likely be attributed to parties' rather than voters' bias.

When considering all these factors, it is also important to note that the systematic under-representation of women in political institutions is likely self-reinforcing, due to gendered group dynamics. In the laboratory, women in male-majority teams appear significantly less likely to put their name forward as team-leaders than women in female-majority teams; they anticipate,



correctly, lower support from team members (see Born et al., 2019). Female mayors in Italy are significantly more likely to be removed by their municipal councils than their comparable male colleagues; importantly, this is especially true when the share of male councillors is particularly large (Gagliarducci and Paserman, 2011). These studies suggest that, since the political arena has been historically male-dominated, gendered group dynamics can create vicious cycles of women's under-representation.

Which policies can be used to increase women's representation in political institutions?

Different policies can be considered to address the various factors accounting for women's under-representation in politics. In an attempt to address the "supply side" aspect of women's under-representation, various non-profit organizations have offered training programs aimed at providing women with knowledge, skills and networks to build political careers (see, for instance, NDI 2013). While reviewing the existing literature on these programs is beyond the scope of this brief, to the best of my knowledge there is little to no research-based evidence on the quantitative impact of training on women's advancements in politics. Non-profit organizations, political parties and researchers may fruitfully collaborate to implement and systematically test training programs.

Gender quotas are the most commonly used policy intervention, especially those regulating the composition of candidate lists, and they have been extensively studied; overall the literature suggests that quotas are more or less effective in empowering women depending on their design and the context where they are used (see Campa and Hauser, 2020 for a more comprehensive

review of the economics literature on gender quotas and related policy implications). Given the nuances in the functioning of quotas, countries or regions that consider their adoption should consult with experts who know the ins and outs of such policies and combine their expertise with local knowledge of the relevant context.

The structure and distribution of power within parties is likely crucial for improving women's political representation. Some scholars have devoted attention to the role of women's organizations within parties. Theoretically such organizations should favour the creation of networks and offer mentorship services, which are likely crucial to climb the career ladder in politics. In Sweden, a coalition of women from both the right and the left is credited for having pressed the Social Democrats' into adopting their internal zipper quota by threatening to form a feminist party (see Besley et al., 2017). Women's wings within political parties could play a similar role. Kantola (2018) notes that women's organizations seem to be currently deemed as outdated, at least in European parties; Childs and Kittilson (2016), on the other hand, find that their presence does not seem to harm women's promotion to executive roles within parties, a concern that has been associated with the existence of such organizations. In countries with public funding of political parties, specific funds could be directed to women's organizations within parties.

Folke and Rickne (2020) also note that, since women in top jobs appear to face more relational and family constraints than men, policies that improve the distribution of economic roles within couples could help address the under-representation of women in positions of political power; their observation underlines the crucial role of gender-role attitudes in affecting women's



empowerment in any area of society. How can these attitudes change? An increasing amount of research is being devoted to answer this question. Campa and Serafinelli (2019), for instance, show that a politico-economic regime that puts emphasis on women's inclusion in the labor market can change some of these attitudes. More research from different contexts and on specific policies will hopefully provide more guidance for policy makers on this important aspect, but the message from the existing research is that gender-role attitudes can be changed, and therefore policy-makers should devote attention to interventions that can influence the formation of such attitudes.

In many Western democracies the rate of progress in women's access to top political positions has proven especially slow. This history of Western democracies and the existence of the self-reinforcing mechanisms described above can serve as a lesson for countries in transitions, where new political organizations and institutions are emerging. In absence of specific policies that address women's underrepresentation at lower levels very early on, it would likely take a very long time before gender gaps are closed at higher levels of the political hierarchy.

In concluding, I observe that constant monitoring of the gender gaps in political institutions is important, even in presence of clear upward trends, since progress is rarely linear and therefore needs continuous nurturing.

Women in Polish parliamentary elections after 1989

Women in the Polish Parliament

As is the case for many countries in the CEE region, Poland has been coming to terms with the longstanding underrepresentation of women in local and national politics. Out of the 460 members of the lower house of the Parliament (Sejm) between the year of the first fully free elections in 1991 and 2007 the number of women rose from 44 (9.6%) to 94 (20.4%) and 110 (23.9%) in 2011. However, in the last two elections the development abated slightly, with 125 (27.2%) female MPs elected in 2015 and 132 (28.7%) - in the latest elections of 2019. Poor representation of women can be also seen across the upper house of Parliament and among Polish representatives in the European Parliament (Niewiadomska-Cudak, 2017; Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2020). Despite the gender underrepresentation in the legislative bodies, only 3 out of the 14 Polish Prime Ministers since 1991 were women, with two female prime ministers who served their terms back to back between 2014 and 2017. Therefore, as of 2020, Poland remained far behind other European countries in terms of the proportion of women in Parliament (Sweden - 47% of female MPs, Spain - 44%, Belgium - 41%), and was only 104th out of 182 countries in the latest ranking for the representation of women in ministerial positions (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2020). Despite the recent changes, the fact that women still make up just over one quarter of the members of the lower house of the Parliament and remain under-represented throughout the political institutions raises questions of the



reasons behind it and the potential steps which could be taken to address this continued underrepresentation.

In the European context, Poland remains a culturally conservative country on issues of gender equality, with the current ruling Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) frequently railing against so-called 'gender-ideology' whenever the issue of gender inequality is raised in the public debate (Gwiazda, 2020). The political sphere is by and large still a male-dominated space, and women are significantly underrepresented in higher decision-making positions. Looking at the electoral lists in parliamentary elections in Poland, we see that there are fewer women that run for office than men, a smaller number of women are placed in the top spots on electoral lists, and women remain less likely than men to be elected when they do run for office. As we show below, parties' bias may play a significant role in determining these outcomes and undermining the ability of women to overcome the strongly ingrained voters' bias evident especially in some regions of the country.

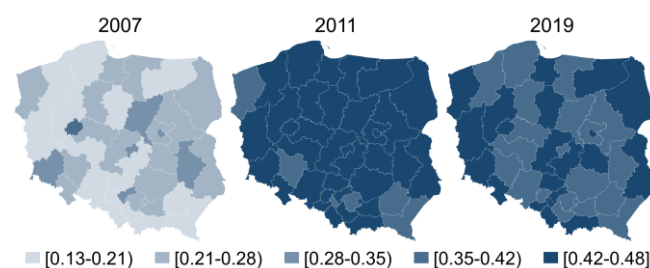
The proportion of women on electoral lists has received a significant boost as a result of the recent introduction of legal quotas. An analysis of the changes which took place after their introduction adds to existing research showing that gender quotas facilitate improvements in female representation, but on their own may not automatically bring about the expected results.

The implications of gender quotas on electoral lists

Recognising the significant underrepresentation of women in Polish politics, in 2011 the coalition government of the Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, PO) and the Polish Peasant Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe, PSL) introduced

gender quotas on electoral lists in most local elections and for the lower chamber of the Parliament (*Dz.U. 2011 nr 34 poz. 172*). These quotas – which require that at least 35% of places on electoral lists are allocated to either women or men – came into force for the first time in the local elections in the spring of that year and in the national elections in October, 2011 (ISAP-Sejm, 2011).

Figure 1: Proportion of women on electoral lists in Poland: 2007, 2011 and 2019



Source: National Electoral Commission, 2020

Notes: Aggregate regional proportions by electoral constituency for all political parties.

In Figure 1 we show the proportion of women included on candidate lists in specific constituencies in three parliamentary elections held in 2007, 2011 and 2019. We can see an immediate response to the quota legislation in 2011, with an interesting drop in the proportion of women on the lists in the most recent vote, despite the legal obligation for the parties to obey the quota. The reform has achieved its direct aim of increasing the number of female candidates for parliamentary seats, with the average proportion across all electoral lists rising from 23.1% in 2007 to 42.1% in 2019. However, as shown by Górecki and Kukołowicz (2014), the probability of being elected for female candidates has actually declined, so the impact of the reform was much smaller when it comes to the proportion of female MPs, indicating that other barriers exist.

The role of voters' and parties' bias



Poland has seen a small improvement in the Gender Equality Index from 0.68 to 0.74 between 2005 and 2020, mainly driven by increases in the Political Empowerment and Economic Participation subindexes. (WEF, 2020). The performance in the Political Empowerment subindex, despite a rise from 0.11 in 2005 to 0.26 in 2020 remains especially poor in comparison with many other European countries (e.g.: in 2020 Sweden - 0.53, Spain - 0.53, Germany- 0.48). This improvement reflects the increased representation of women in the Polish Parliament in the recent elections after the introduction of electoral quotas. However, the continued low value of the index raises questions of reasons which go beyond the legal electoral framework, such as social norms regarding political participation of women, or the role of the bias within political parties in determining the fate of female candidates in parliamentary elections.

Looking at the attitudes towards female political engagement measured in the World Values Survey we find only small improvements over the last two decades in Poland. In 2017, 27.6% of Polish respondents still agreed or strongly agreed that *“men make better political leaders than women”* (down from 38.5% in 2005). Moreover, the same percentage of people as in 2005 (12.9%) believed that women having the same rights as men was non-essential for democracy (UN 2020). This suggests that pervasive social norms may continue to limit greater representation of women in Polish politics in the coming years.

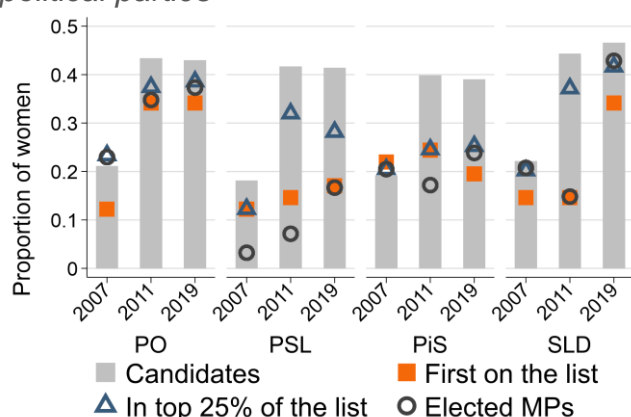
Just as in the other dimensions, identification of differences in political outcomes as effects of discrimination is far from straightforward. However, examining the structure of electoral lists of four major Polish political parties sheds some light on a potential party bias as an important cause behind the continued

underrepresentation of women in parliamentary politics. In Figure 2 we present analysis of the data published by the National Electoral Commission for the 2007, 2011 and 2019 parliamentary elections. While we can note the dramatic increase in the proportion of women on electoral lists following the introduction of gender quotas in early 2011, in all parties' lists except for the Civic Platform's (Platforma Obywatelska, PO) the change has not been fully reflected by the proportion of women in top places, which has not increased. In the case of the Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) party's lists it also had little impact for the number of women in the highest quartile of positions. The speed and level of these changes are strongly related to each party's placement on the political spectrum, with the position of women on ballots of the center-left (PO) and left-wing (Democratic Left Alliance - Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej, SLD) parties improving much faster in comparison to the peasant (Polish People's Party - Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe, PSL) or conservative (PiS) parties. For example, while the proportion of women in the top 25% of positions on electoral lists of the Civic Platform (PO) in elections since 2011 has been over 40%, women represented only about a quarter of all candidates placed in the top 25% of the lists of the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party. In the 2019 election, women led 34.1% of their respective party lists in the case of the Civic Platform (PO) and the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), and only 19.5% of the lists of the Law and Justice (PiS) party and 17.1% of the lists of the Polish People's Party (PSL). As we can see - with the exception of the PSL - there is a strong correlation between the proportion of women among the top 25% of candidates on electoral lists and the proportion of women elected as Members of Parliament, indicating an important role of internal party



politics for the final outcome of the electoral process. This translates into a significant variation in the proportion of women elected to the lower chamber of the Parliament across the four political parties. While in 2019 42.9% and 37.3% of MPs from SLD and PO respectively were women, this proportion was much lower for both PiS (23.8%) and the PSL (16.7%).

Figure 2: Women in Parliamentary elections of 2007, 2011 and 2019 by major Polish political parties



Source: National Electoral Commission, 2020

Note: political parties or main parties within coalitions; PO - Civic Platform, PSL - Polish People's Party, PiS - Law and Justice, SLD - Democratic Left Alliance.

Conclusion

Women in Poland continue to be under-represented in both houses of Parliament and in the highest political positions. Of the sixteen ministries in the current government only one - the Ministry of Family and Social Affairs - is headed by a woman. This means that despite steady improvements in female participation across various dimensions of society, Poland still fares poorly in the Political Empowerment component of the Gender Equality Index (GEI) in comparison to other European countries. Women's political representation in Poland received a formal boost through the introduction of a 35% quota on electoral lists in 2011, yet this has so far failed to fully close the gap in

parliamentary representation. This can be partially attributed to conservative cultural attitudes and a historically male-dominated composition of political institutions, but is also likely related to continued bias against female candidates within political parties. As we have shown, a disproportionate number of men continue to occupy top positions on electoral lists, which is strongly correlated with the proportion of men and women elected on specific party tickets. Out of the four major parties that were included in the analysis above, the Law and Justice (PiS) party has been especially resistant to the inclusion of women in favourable positions on electoral lists. Since the party won the last two rounds of parliamentary elections, the increase in the number of female MPs in the Polish Parliament subsided.

Thousands of women (and men) took to the streets since October 2020 in reaction to the controversial decision of the Constitutional Tribunal which essentially implies a total ban on abortion rights in Poland. The so-called 'Women's strike' has proved a powerful voice and has resonated in society as a whole, as well as within formal political institutions. It seems to reflect both the changing social norms and expectations, as well as the feeling that women's voices are not sufficiently well represented in Parliament and other political institutions. The strength of the reaction may prove a breakthrough in terms of equalising the formal representation of women in Polish politics. However, addressing the underrepresentation of women will require a comprehensive approach, combining changes in social attitudes as well as internal party dynamics, potentially also supported with further legal requirements such as an increased proportion of candidates of either gender on



electoral lists or the alternation of male and female candidates in top positions of these lists.

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