

Improving Democracy: Gender Quotas and Diversity in Canada

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Abstract: The adoption of quotas for the election of women is a worldwide trend that is changing the face of national politics in many countries. Research shows that such measures are successful. First, this text reviews international literature on the adoption of gender quotas for electing women and their impact on minority women. What are the processes leading to the adoption of gender quotas in different contexts? Who initiates the process? How do quota campaigns get started? In the second section, the text uses Canada as a case study to understand the starting point for gender and/or diversity quota campaigns. In Canada, the idea of quotas for women and for minorities is on the agenda of many political organizations, but although there seems to be a new symbolic opening for having gender quotas at some levels of Canadian political institutions, popular support is still low. What about quotas for other groups such as minorities? A survey conducted in 2016 found that a majority of Canadians are open to designating seats for the country's Indigenous peoples to boost their representation in Parliament and on the Supreme Court. Another study conducted on existing affirmative action programs provides insight on how quotas are perceived. These programs, in operation since the 1980s, are aimed at redressing past inequities and promoting the hiring of five designated groups. The survey indicates that no one is in favour of discriminating against marginalized groups; nevertheless, a large majority of respondents supported meritocracy and resisted affirmative action. In the 2021 Canadian federal election, there were no gender quotas and the number of women elected at the Canadian Parliament was 30% percent, a 1% increase from the 2019 election. In Quebec, one of the thirteen provinces and territories of Canada, an informal campaign for gender quotas in the 2018 provincial election has led to the election of 41% of women. Gender quota campaigns create openings to introduce diversity into the conversation. More research is needed to explain why there is still resistance to certain types of quotas such as gender quotas in the specific context of Canada. Overall, bringing a more diversified body of representatives to parliaments contributes to the revitalization of electoral politics and can improve democracy.

Keywords: Democracy; quotas; gender; Canada; diversity

1. Introduction

In 2022, about 50% of the countries of the world have electoral quotas; the use of electoral gender quotas is much more widespread than is commonly held (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, IDEA). The adoption of quotas for the election of women is a worldwide trend that is changing the face of national politics in many countries (Hugues, 2011). Why? Research shows that gender quotas work. They have diffused rapidly around the world in recent decades and this has resulted in dramatic transformations in women's access to political power (Krook, 2016). Gender quotas have a greater impact than other institutional factors on the presence of women in elected office (Franceschet 2021, 125) and they may have an acceleration effect on women's representation in leadership posts (O'Brien and Rickne, 2016). Although electoral gender quotas have emerged as one of the critical political reforms of the last two decades (Krook and Zetterberg, 2014), a new wave of research is raising questions about the impact of gender-only quotas on a wide variety of representative processes. Joshi and Rakkee (2018) document how, in recent years, quota scholars have shifted their attention from the causes behind parliamentary gender quotas to their consequences for representation. Krook and Zetterberg raise issues about the diversity of women elected under quota regimes (2014, 287–88). Celis and Erzeel (2013) use an intersectional framework in their analysis of political quotas; they introduce variables such as race and ethnicity to assess the output of gender quotas in two contexts. They observe that ethnic minority groups have experienced difficulties to integrate into formal politics; when ethnic minorities have been integrated it was through the presence of ethnic minority *women*. Allen et al. (2016) show that gender quotas do not reduce the quality of politicians elected through quotas; quotas women are as equally qualified for political office as their colleagues.

Although they have been adopted in more than 130 countries, quotas are not universal (Krook, 2019). In Canada, there are no electoral quotas for the election of women at the national level even if the percentage of women elected is low, Canada being at the 59th position of the Inter-Parliamentary Union ranking (Equal Voice). Canadian initiatives over the last thirty years to counter the problem of low numbers of women elected have been characterized by a strong emphasis on training for political office and a lack of mobilization in favour of gender quotas. In Canada, several women's organizations were formed to take up the electoral project. These groups encourage and assist women running for office. A common feature of their proposed approaches to the problem of women's underrepresentation in governments is to target women individually and train them for

politics, assuming that low numbers of elected women are linked to individual women and not to structures. These groups work to increase the numbers of women elected without quotas or reserved seats for women. They operate on the hypothesis that it is women who must adapt or be changed in order to comply with the requirements of a political career. The prevailing form of intervention is training programs designed to help women work on their inadequacies vis-à-vis the political system, be they a lack of competence or perceived lack of confidence, the underlying assumption being that providing women with political skills will result in an increased number of women running for politics and winning elections (Maillé, 2015).

Given the slow speed by which the percentage of elected women is growing on the Canadian territory, the idea of quotas for women and for minorities is in the air. There seems to be a new symbolic opening for having gender quotas at some levels of Canadian political institutions, but popular support is still low. Franceschet argues that arguments against quotas in Canada are based on flawed claims about a mismatch between what makes quotas effective and Canada's political realities (Franceschet 2021, 125). She identifies three common objections against the adoption of gender quotas at the national level in Canada: quotas are ineffective in countries such as Canada, with single-member district electoral systems; quotas clash with the principle of local autonomy in candidate selection; quotas undermine the principle of merit in candidate selection (126). In her analysis, Franceschet shows that each of these objections is based on flawed arguments.

What about quotas for other groups? A survey conducted in 2016 by Environics Institute and the Institute on Governance found that a majority of Canadians are open to designating seats for the country's Indigenous peoples to boost their representation in Parliament and on the Supreme Court (May, 2016). Another study conducted on existing affirmative action programs in the Canadian context provides insight on how quotas are perceived. These programs are aimed at redressing past inequities and promoting the hiring of five designated groups: women, visible minorities, racial minorities, Indigenous peoples, and persons with disabilities. The survey indicates that no one is in favour of discriminating against marginalized groups; nevertheless, a large majority of respondents support meritocracy and resist affirmative action (Ng, 2016).

In the next section of this text, I refer to two authors who raise questions about gender quotas in relation to minority women and diversity and I review research on processes that lead to the adoption of gender quotas. Who initiates the process? How do quota campaigns get started? I use Canada as a case study to examine the starting point for gender and/or diversity quota campaigns. I analyze recent Canadian federal elections and the results obtained in terms of numbers of women elected without gender quotas. Then I look at an informal yet successful campaign for gender quotas conducted in Quebec, one of Canada's province. In my conclusion, I make four observations: 1- in Canada, there is evidence of growing social pressure to have a more diversified body of representatives; 2- more research is needed to explain why there is still resistance to certain types of quotas in the Canadian context; 3- campaigns for gender quotas can also create openings to introduce diversity into the conversation; 4- quotas can be seen as a way for rejuvenating democracy.

2. Gender quotas, minority women and diversity

According to Huber, evidence that supports the positive impact of gender quotas in political representation is mounting, and the debate has shifted from 'do they work?' to 'what else is needed?' There is agreement in scholarship and practice that gender quotas require enforcement mechanisms, incentives and accompanying action and activities to produce gender equality in political leadership. Huber identifies a new challenge in today's discussion of quotas: the treatment of women as a monolith. She writes, "The rise in discussions about intersectional feminism ... is a global trend, perhaps most visible as a deliberate inclusion strategy ... Women have unique experiences because of their race, class, religion, disability, sexual orientation and gender identity. How does this diversity play a role in implementing gender quotas?" (Huber, 2017).

Hugues (2011) looks at how quotas affect minority women. She identifies the conditions under which gender quotas and minority quotas might improve the political representation of minority women through a worldwide analysis comparing the election of women from more than three hundred racial, ethnic, and religious groups across eighty-one countries. Policies designed to promote the political representation of women and of minority groups interact to produce diverse but predictable outcomes for minority women. She concludes that the quota policies currently in effect rarely challenge majority men's dominance of national legislatures.

One question raised by Hugues is which type of quota is best for promoting representation of marginalized groups. For Hugues, empirical research on quotas tends to ignore minorities and minority women and it leaves at least three important questions unanswered. First, do quotas effectively increase the political representation of minority females relative to their majority female and minority male counterparts? Second, which policies – party gender quotas, national gender quotas, or minority quotas – tend to benefit minority women the most? Third, do minority women benefit or suffer from the simultaneous presence of these policies? She concludes that gender and minority quotas tend to benefit primarily majority women and minority men. Minority women do benefit from national gender quotas or minority quotas to a lesser degree, but majority women appear to be the only beneficiaries of party gender quotas. The picture changes substantially, however, when these policies are combined. The few countries with tandem quotas have dramatically higher levels of minority women's legislative representation than do countries with any other institutional configuration of quotas (Hugues, 2011).

3. Processes leading to the adoption of gender quotas

Another important question that relates to the adoption of gender quotas in politics has to do with the process that leads to their adoption. Who initiates the process? How do quota campaigns get started? Krook (2010) identifies two key elements: women in civil society and political parties. She also highlights the importance of context: quota campaigns are successful to the extent that quotas mesh with pre-existing political dynamics. In their 2006 study, Krook et al. identify additional elements: usually, quota proposals originate with women's groups inside political parties, but these efforts culminate in quota adoption only when elites perceive such policies as an effective way to compete favourably with other parties for the support of female voters. The authors also note that how the notion of equality is understood and applied in a country will influence the discussion on quotas. They suggest that representations of equality are related to citizenship models and identify Canada as having a liberal citizenship model that involves a philosophical commitment to individuals, favours equal opportunities, attributes responsibility for unequal outcomes to individuals (merit), and views prospects of change in terms of individual initiative.

4. Canada and quotas

An explanation for the absence of gender quotas for women in Canadian politics has to do with the fact that none of the elements identified in the previous section as possible starting points for gender quota campaigns have ever mobilized around this claim in this specific context. In the October 2019 election, without gender quotas, the number of women elected to the Canadian Parliament rose by 3 percentage points, to 28.9 percent (98 women/338 seats). In the 2021 Canadian federal election, there were still no gender quotas and the number of women elected at the Canadian Parliament was 30% percent, a 1% increase from the 2019 election (103 women/338 seats).

Among factors proposed to explain the absence of mobilization for gender quotas in Canadian electoral politics, Young (2013) identifies features of Canadian political culture, such as the notion that political parties are private entities and the belief in merit over affirmative action. According to Young, Canada has inherited the British notion that political parties are private entities that should not be subject to extensive state regulation and the population tends to support merit over affirmative action in the hiring of employees, including politicians.

In 2015, the newly elected prime minister, Justin Trudeau, appointed a parity cabinet, with women holding 50 percent of ministerial seats. When asked why he prioritized gender equality when recruiting ministers, he answered, "Because it's 2015" (Chartrand, 2015). The principle of a cabinet with an equal number of women and men became a permanent commitment for the liberals during the 2019 and 2021 electoral campaigns. The cabinet made international headlines for being one of the most diverse in Canadian history in its gender but also in its ethnic composition (de Geus and Loewen, 2021, p. 13). This example implies that the idea of quotas is current in Canadian politics, even if not directly translated into measures at the candidate level. Another form of quotas that has been constitutive of Canadian politics is about territory, an argument put forth by Bashevkin who suggests to use Canada's geographic quotas as a guide for building the demand for gender representation: "What about introducing rules that insist on gender representation – to parallel existing provisions that entrench geographic or territorial quotas in our system?" (Bashevkin, 2009, 151). Also, because regional representation has always been at the centre of selection to Canadian cabinets, issues of diversity and quotas have been reflected in some aspects of Canada's electoral system and "in the end, those who disagree with such quotas bear the burden of demonstrating that the equitable representation of women in government is unmeritorious – a position that is simply not supported by evidence" (S. Franceschet, K. Beckwith and C. Annesley, 2015). In

the view of Franceschet, Beckwith, and Annesley, critics of quotas have framed the debate in a way that sets up an irreconcilable tension between the principle of merit and the goal of diversity.

In 2018, *Maclean's* magazine published an editorial titled "It's in the Air: Canada Should Elect a Gender-balanced Parliament in 2019." The author made reference to the need for change in the House of Commons: "Nearly a century after Agnes MacPhail was the first woman elected to the House of Commons, only about a quarter of seats are held by women. It's time for that to change." In 2019, the government of Canada conducted hearings on measures that could be implemented to help improve the representation of women in electoral politics in Canada. Various opinions were presented on quotas. In its final report, the committee but made a recommendation to registered parties to set voluntary quotas for the percentage of female candidates they field in federal elections and to publicly report on their efforts to meet these quotas after every federal general election (House of Commons Canada, 2019).

4.1 The 2021 election in Canada

In the most recent federal election, held in September 2021, a total of 102 women have been elected to the House of Commons, a slight increase from the 98 women elected after the 2019 general election which brings the percentage of women elected federally from 29% to 30% (Equal Voice). The gain is modest, considering that the highest percentage of female candidates than even before was running in this election (CTV News). In a press release, Equal Voice, one of the most influential groups working towards increasing women's representation among elected officials in Canadian politics, wrote: "In 2021 we are marking the 100th anniversary of the first woman MP being elected to the House of Commons and we are pleased to see that the largest number of women ever elected federally will be seated in the House this year to mark this historic anniversary. However, the fact that it has taken 100 years to elect over a hundred women MPs also shows us how much faster Canada needs to move forward and elect more women in order to achieve gender parity." Attention to the election of women representing marginalized communities is also demanded, since the Canadian political terrain is in no way equitable when it comes to Indigenous women: "instead, it is overdetermined by colonialism and historical and ongoing power dynamics that drastically favour colonial Canada at the expense of Indigenous peoples. Instead of an act of democratic citizenship, Indigenous women's political participation is innately adversarial: the colonized versus the colonizer" (Bourgeois, 2021, p. 49). Without quotas, the number of women elected at the national level in Canadian politics will remain unpredictable and possibly as low as 30% and this will undermine the quality of democratic life in a country where equality for all is a governing principle.

4.2 The 2018 election in Quebec

In Quebec, for years, feminist interventions on the problem of low numbers of elected women in politics identified clearly the gender gap in elected officials. The prevailing actions developed by women's groups were based on strategies such as training programs designed specifically for women. Despite decades of training programs, there were fewer women in provincial elected office just before the start of the last election, in 2018, than there had been in 2003. Things changed in the October 2018 provincial election: Quebec elected 41.6 percent women (52 women/125 seats). Although no legal quotas for women were implemented for that election, there was a strong movement in favour of the adoption of such quotas in the background of the 2018 Quebec election, which became an opportunity to introduce diversity to the gender quotas campaign.

In 2015, the Conseil du Statut de la femme (CSF), an advisory body to the government of Quebec, published *Les femmes en politique: en route vers la parité*. The study's authors looked at the impact of measures that had been implemented over the previous twenty years in Quebec to increase the numbers of elected women and concluded that these measures had been insufficient and therefore quotas were necessary. One specific recommendation was to adopt an obligation for political parties to recruit at least 40 percent women candidates, with financial penalties for parties that did not meet the objective. The CSF also expressed a concern for diversity with the introduction of gender quotas (CSF, 2015, 106).

The ideas brought forth by the CSF were supported by Groupe Femmes, Politique et Démocratie (GFPD), the most influential group in Quebec on women and politics. In a position paper presented in 2015, GFPD stated that the adoption of quotas was essential on a temporary basis (cited in GFPD, 2019). In a book published in 2015, journalist Pascale Navarro, a spokesperson for GFPD, argued for parity in Quebec's National Assembly. On March 8, 2018, GFPD launched the campaign #paritépourdebon, asking for measures to guarantee the joint representation of women and men. In May 2018, GFPD proposed a bill calling for parity in Quebec politics and specifically asking for an amendment to the Election Act that would force all political parties to ensure that

women make up 40 to 60 percent of all candidates. The GFPD proposal would have required every political party to field a minimum of 40 percent female candidates, a proportion that would rise to 45 percent in the subsequent election. During the 2018 Quebec election campaign, the question of quotas for women received a good deal of attention. In *Le Devoir*, a highly influential daily newspaper, a “*vigie parité*” (parity watch) was created, providing weekly reports on the progression of percentages of female candidates selected for each party. On September 11, 2018, *Le Devoir* journalist Guillaume Bourgault-Côté reported that the final count for that election was 47.9 percent female candidates. Though there were no legal quotas for the 2018 election, all four main parties exceeded the 40 percent target. Overall, the pressure was built through specific interventions made by the CSF and GFPD. Even the leading political party, Coalition Avenir Québec, more conservative on women’s issues, went along, recruiting 48 percent women candidates, which is part of the explanation for this significant jump in the proportion of elected women. Interestingly, the public conversation around quotas for women in politics created an opportunity to introduce the issue of diversity into the discussion and Institut NéoQuébec kept a record of percentages of candidates from visible minorities. Québec solidaire had the highest percentage with 17 percent of racialized female candidates of all female candidates, against 14.6 percent for Coalition Avenir Québec, 7.1 percent for Parti québécois and 5.4 percent for Parti libéral du Québec (Institut NéoQuébec, ‘Scope’). In a paper published in *Le Devoir*, sociologist Myrlande Pierre referred to the movement for a parity bill initiated by GFPD and she asked to include measures to promote diversity to a bill on parity: “How could we, in 2016, envision reaching parity in power structures without systematically integrating the principle of diversity? I’m asking the question to all progressive Quebec feminists” (Pierre, our translation).

5. Conclusion

Four observations can be made to summarize the arguments developed in this text. First, in Canada, there is evidence of growing social pressure to have a more diversified body of representatives. The mainstreaming of the demand for gender-balanced representation in the House of Commons has created new opportunities. The proportion of women elected in the 2019 and 2021 federal elections and the lack of progression in percentages of women elected over the last 20 years provide additional arguments for the implementation of gender quotas. Without such measures, the progress in numbers of women elected could remain slow and unpredictable for another century. The example of Quebec and its informal campaign for gender quotas in the most recent provincial election has shown that it is possible to build support for gender quotas by combining the strengths of women's movements with other public voices, without a formal legal framework. Another observation for the Quebec case is that when opportunities are offered to women, there is no shortage of candidates and all the traditional explanations for having fewer women candidates are overturned. A second observation is that more research is needed to explain why there is still resistance to certain types of quotas in the Canadian context, considering that the main arguments used against the implementation of quotas are flawed. A third observation is that campaigns for gender quotas can create openings to introduce diversity into the conversation, as illustrated by the campaign for diversity in gender quotas started in Quebec. More efficient ways to reach a gender-balanced and diversified body of elected representatives are necessary and quotas are on the list.

A final observation is that quotas can be seen as a way for rejuvenating democracy. Since quotas for women and for other underrepresented groups can ensure their inclusion in parliaments, they might help restore faith in democracy by bringing the interests of a more diversified body into the conversation. The introduction of quotas has helped overcome constraints on women's representation posed by economic underdevelopment, cultural influences, and even electoral systems (Tripp and Kang, 2008). In the same logic, diversity quotas can bring a wind of change in old parliamentary traditions. Quotas have often been adopted in countries where women have low status, with the help of international influence and promoting gender equality, including through gender quotas, has become a key part of international democracy promotion through postconflict peace operations, and indirectly, by encouraging countries, especially those that depend on foreign aid, to signal their commitment to democracy by adopting quotas (Bush, 2011), another illustration of the possibility of discussing democracy through quotas.

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