

Contagious Representation?

How Regime Type Conditions the Effect of Legislative Gender Quotas on Equal Access to State Jobs

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March 2025
Volume 32, Number 2

105-116
When do agents believe the world is a just society? Evidence from a survey of 1000 people in 10 countries
Sergio L. Pardo and David G. Foray

117-130
The COVID-19 pandemic and popular mobilization in democracy: Evidence from the 2020 US election
Ying Fan

131-144
The nation state of democracy: Building a Bangladesh in a world of post-colonial states
Md. Wahidul Karim and Md. Mahabub Karim

145-158
Democratization and institutional development: Evidence from the 2019 Indian general election
Elizabeth T. Rubin and Michael T. Rehg

159-172
Should the world be more democratic? A global perspective on democratic quality
Alex Sten and Anders Nylin

173-186
Democracy and ethnic inequality: A comparative case study from Uganda
Loren Spindler

187-200
Changing the rules of the game: The impact of institutional reform on the quality of democracy in the 2010s
Mads Dagnis Jensen, Suen Wang and Michael T. Rehg

201-214
What are the implications of institutional reform for democracy? Evidence from the 2010s
Mads Dagnis Jensen, Suen Wang and Michael T. Rehg

215-228
Explaining democratic quality in Europe and Asia: The role of institutions, culture and geography
Mads Dagnis Jensen, Suen Wang and Michael T. Rehg

229-242
Media freedom, democracy and quality of institutions: Evidence from the 2010s
Mads Dagnis Jensen, Suen Wang and Michael T. Rehg

243-256
Judicial independence: A global perspective on the quality of institutions
Mads Dagnis Jensen, Suen Wang and Michael T. Rehg

257-270
Should gender have a stronger influence on the quality of institutions? Evidence from the 2010s
Mads Dagnis Jensen, Suen Wang and Michael T. Rehg

271-284
Publishing under the banner of democracy: Evidence from the 2010s
Mads Dagnis Jensen, Suen Wang and Michael T. Rehg

285-298
Editorial Board

Democratization

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Contagious representation? How regime type conditions the effect of legislative gender quotas on equal access to state jobs*

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ABSTRACT


This study examines the “contagious” effect of legislative gender quotas on gender-equal access to jobs in state institutions, and how this effect varies across regime types. Combining theories on contagious representation with prior work on gender and regime types, we analyse a panel dataset of 160 countries from 1981 to 2020 using a generalized difference-in-differences model. We find that quotas significantly increase gender-equal access to state jobs in democracies, but not in autocracies. This effect is robust to accounting for women’s representation in elected office and persists regardless of the magnitude of the increase in women’s legislative representation after quotas are implemented. The effect emerges only after democratization and becomes significant 3 years after a transition, which increases our confidence that the contagious effect is contingent on the democratic context.

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KEYWORDS Democracy; autocracy; quantitative methods; causal inference; democratization; gender quotas

Introduction

As of 2024, more than 130 countries have implemented legislative gender quotas.¹ Micro-level studies have undertaken in-depth analyses of how quotas increase women’s legislative presence in national legislatures, and how this influences gender-equal legislative policy outcomes.² While these studies provide valuable insights into how quotas affect representation in national legislatures, a growing body of macro-level research suggests they have broader “contagious” effects beyond legislative institutions: they improve outcomes in areas such as good governance and women’s health.³

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*All data and code supporting the study’s findings are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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Yet, we still know little about how legislative gender quotas advance gender equality beyond the legislature, particularly within state institutions and across different regime types. A central argument in the literature is that quotas' ability to achieve broader gender equality depends on the regime type. In democracies, which feature electoral accountability and parliamentary power, quotas may lead to gender-equal policy changes. However, in autocracies, where accountability is limited and power is concentrated, legislative gender quotas may be implemented for ideological or instrumental reasons, such as deflecting criticism, attracting foreign aid, or enhancing international legitimacy. However, it remains uncertain whether these quotas have a broader, contagious effect on state institution.⁴

To address this gap in our understanding of whether legislative gender quotas influence gender equality beyond the legislature and across different regime types, this article proposes a theoretical framework that integrates the concept of contagious representation⁵ with recent work on gender and political regimes.⁶ It theorizes how legislative quotas can promote gender-equal access to jobs in state institutions and examines whether (and how) this effect varies between democracies and autocracies.

Gender equality in access to state jobs is the dependent variable in our empirical test of this framework. We employ the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) measure of exclusion, which defines gender equality in access to state jobs as the extent to which positions in state institutions are equally open to qualified individuals regardless of their gender.⁷ The measure accounts for merit-based state employment systems that are prevalent in many countries to ensure it accurately reflects whether qualified individuals of any gender have equal opportunities to access state positions. Unlike V-Dem's measures of equal access to political power,⁸ which focus on political appointees including ministers and top bureaucrats, this measure is designed to capture civil service positions. By excluding politically appointed roles, it provides a targeted assessment of gender-equal access to jobs within the civil service of state institutions.

Building on Thames and Williams,⁹ we expect legislative gender quotas to have a contagious effect beyond legislative institutions and influence state institutions for three main reasons. First, such quotas can cause legislative institutions to exert pressure on other institutions in the political system and increase the representation of women. Second, the successful inclusion of women in the legislature increases confidence that expanding women's representation across institutions will also go well. Third, other institutions may seek to enhance their legitimacy and credibility with the public by aligning with the legislature's progressive stance on gender equality.

The mechanisms through which quotas influence gender-equal access to jobs in state institutions likely vary across regime types. In *democracies*, legislative quotas and increased women's representation can influence gender-equal access to jobs in state institutions via parliamentary powers. This influence occurs directly by applying pressure during agenda setting (debates, discussions, committee work) and legislative policymaking on gender equality bills (from proposal to passage). It also happens indirectly through legislative power over budgets that fund state institutions.¹⁰ State institutions may also replicate the legislature's progress on gender equality to align with public expectations and ensure consistency across institutions. Observing the implementation of gender-equal initiatives in legislative institutions may help state institutions mitigate the uncertainties and perceived risks associated with increasing gender equality. Finally, in democracies, gender-equal employment is often a

general democratic norm to which state institutions must adhere in order to maintain or improve their legitimacy.

Quotas' impact on these processes likely differs significantly in *autocracies* in three ways. First, parliamentary quotas are unlikely to induce pressure through debates, legislation, or budget control due to the lack of genuine parliamentary power and accountability. Rather, authoritarian leaders who introduce legislative gender quotas to appear more inclusive may also expand women's roles in state institutions. Second, risk perception may differ in autocracies: the motivation to implement gender equality measures does not come from a perception of decreased risks, but rather the need to follow the regime leaders' will.¹¹ Third, state institutions in authoritarian regimes place less emphasis on securing legitimacy from the citizens and more on being perceived as legitimate by those in power.¹² To enhance their legitimacy, autocratic regimes can be committed to improving gender equality for instrumental reasons.¹³ They may use measures such as legislative gender quotas and increased female representation in various institutions to achieve this goal.¹⁴

Therefore, our main hypothesis suggests that after gender quotas are implemented, democracies will experience an increase in gender-equal access to state jobs due to contagious effects, whereas autocracies will not, since the mechanisms driving contagion are less effective in authoritarian contexts. However, drawing on the literature on gender washing, we also develop an alternative hypothesis that both democracies and autocracies may experience increased gender-equal access to state jobs after quota implementation.¹⁵ Autocracies may adopt gender quotas and gender-equal policies for both ideological and instrumental reasons. Ideologically, such policies can align with leftist ideals. Instrumentally, they can enhance legitimacy, marginalize the opposition, and attract foreign aid. The centralized power of autocratic regimes allows reforms to be implemented swiftly; women's inclusion can be used to signal modernity and enhance domestic and international legitimacy.

Our main analysis employs a generalized difference-in-differences (DID) approach to examine how gender quotas affect gender-equal access to state jobs and whether this contagious effect differs between democratic and autocratic regimes. We find that the contagious effect of quotas differs significantly across regime types. In democracies, they significantly increase gender-equal access to state jobs, potentially due to the legislative body's formal powers, the reduced risks associated with increasing diversity, and the pursuit of legitimacy. We do not find evidence of this contagious effect in autocratic regimes; they do not effectively diffuse representation from legislative to state institutions, likely due to the absence of democratic authority and accountability. State institutions in such regimes primarily seek to implement the leaders' directives, which minimizes the influence of quotas. These results further suggest that autocratic leaders strategically adopt legislative quotas as a symbolic or controlled reform while deprioritizing more extensive measures, such as improving gender equality across the political system. This may be because legislative quotas provide a clear path to enhancing international and domestic support without jeopardizing the regime's hold on power.¹⁶

Although our dependent variable (gender-equal access to state jobs) is not intended to capture gender-equal access to *elected* office,¹⁷ there may be a correlation between the two. To ensure the robustness of our findings and address endogeneity concerns that this correlation is driving our results, we control for women's political representation in elected office (including the percentages of women ministers,

parliamentarians, or both) and the results remain significant. This analysis isolates the effect of legislative gender quotas on gender equality in state employment, independent of women's representation in elected positions.

Clayton and Zetterberg define low and high quota shocks as increases in the proportion of women in legislative bodies below or above the mean, respectively.¹⁸ We build on this work and differentiate between low and high quota depth levels to account for the possibility that quotas' impact on gender-equal access to state jobs varies with the magnitude of the increase in women's legislative representation induced by the quotas. This approach allows us to assess whether quotas directly influence gender-equal access to state jobs or operate indirectly by enhancing women's political representation. The empirical evidence indicates that in democracies, quotas increase gender-equal access to state jobs, regardless of the quota depth. Both low and high quota shocks exhibit similar positive and statistically significant effects. We observe no significant effects in autocracies, irrespective of quota depth. These findings suggest that quotas' effectiveness in promoting gender equality in public employment depends on regime type: democracies are better able to translate legislative gender quotas into broader institutional change.

Finally, prior research demonstrates that quotas have helped foster gender equality during democratic transitions.¹⁹ The democratization literature further suggests that their effectiveness in promoting gender-equal access to state employment may vary depending on regime type. If regime type conditions the contagious impact, we would expect the relationship to emerge predominantly following transitions to democracy. Conversely, if regime type is *not* a determining factor, the relationship could manifest even before a regime change. To determine which is the case, we analyse the heterogeneous effects of quotas during democratization as an additional empirical test of their impact on gender-equal access to state employment. We find that the effect of quotas on gender-equal access to state employment is statistically insignificant prior to democratization; we detect a significant effect approximately 3 years after a democratic transition. These findings align with the primary conclusion that the quota effect operates effectively in democratic, but not autocratic, regimes. The absence of such effects in autocracies may reflect their instrumental use of quotas as symbolic measures rather than substantive mechanisms for advancing representation.²⁰

Theory

Legislative quotas' contagious effects on gender equality in state institutions

Legislative gender quotas can have a contagious effect, promoting greater gender equality in state institutions. Krook et al.²¹ observe that the legislative quota debates in Belgium promoted the inclusion of women in other government sectors. Their study indicates that legislative gender quotas are based on the norm that diversity in representation is an "essential legitimizing feature," which encourages and legitimizes efforts to increase women's inclusion across government institutions.²² Similarly, Lowande et al.²³ argue that women legislators' shared life experiences can motivate them to increase oversight of state institutions. Legislative gender quotas may thus send a strong signal on gender equality, which helps discourage discriminatory practices that perpetuate gender inequality in state institutions.

We use the notion of contagious representation to describe how legislative quotas' impact extends to influence state institutions. The term was originally coined to explain how smaller (often left-leaning) parties with more female candidates inspired larger centrist parties to increase their own female representation in a competitive political environment.²⁴ Previous studies have extended the concept beyond inter-party dynamics to suggest that increased female representation in one political institution pressures other institutions to adopt similar levels of representation. Thames and Williams²⁵ build on this extended notion to examine how increased female legislative representation can spread to the executive and judicial branches, particularly through political appointments (e.g. cabinet ministers, higher court judges). We further broaden this argument to encompass the wider state apparatus, including civil service employment. Since state institutions are responsible for implementing and enforcing laws, they are intrinsically linked to legislatures. Thus, because legislatures prioritize gender equality – often after quotas are introduced – state institutions may feel compelled to follow suit for three key reasons.²⁶

First, when the selector groups diversify in parliament, this impacts other institutions as well. For example, Thames and Williams provide evidence that women who gain legislative experience through quotas influence the appointment of women as judges.²⁷ Other research has also established that increased female legislative representation can boost the appointment of women to high positions in other branches. O'Brien and Rickne leverage a unique case in which the central party exogenously imposed a 50–50 gender “zipper” quota on 290 local branches of the Swedish Social Democratic Party in 1994.²⁸ They employ a DID design to analyse data on local government leadership appointments from 1988 to 2010 and show that gender quotas increased the selection and reappointment of female leaders in Swedish municipalities, which accelerated the promotion of highly qualified women to executive office.²⁹

While some studies suggest that legislative quotas have a positive contagious effect on female representation in leadership positions in other branches of government, recent research provides a more nuanced perspective. Focusing on the link between legislative gender quotas and women's access to executive office, a novel study by Kerevel³⁰ provides evidence that quotas do *not* help most women break through the glass ceiling to advance to executive office and top positions. This study, based on evidence from nearly 2,000 Mexican legislators, found that quotas have had little impact on increasing women's representation in executive positions. It also shows that women who are already advantaged and least likely to need the support of quotas are the ones most likely to receive executive nominations.

Influential studies have evaluated the diverse effects of contagious representation, focusing on the relationship between legislative gender quotas and representation in top executive posts and leadership positions. In this study, we shift the focus to a different, yet related, aspect: how quotas impact gender-equal access to state employment. Clayton and Zetterberg suggest that quotas can improve gender equality by raising awareness of gender-related issues and by reorienting legislators' priorities towards areas that reflect women's interests.³¹ This shift can occur even with minimal increases in female representation, as quotas send a strong signal and prompt women legislators to advocate on behalf of other women.³² Consequently, quotas may create a perceived mandate for gender equality, ultimately driving changes that influence state institutions. Correspondingly, state institutions may increase gender equality to align with principal institutions – in this case, the

legislature. By increasing women's legislative representation, gender quotas can foster policies that promote gender equality within state institutions, either directly or indirectly through mechanisms such as legislative control over budget allocation.³³

The second reason state institutions may experience pressure to prioritize gender equality after quotas are implemented is that the risk associated with increasing women's representation in other branches decreases following legislative quotas.³⁴ When legislative institutions implement gender quotas and increase women's representation, and other institutions observe that it does not lead to negative outcomes, this fosters greater acceptance of gender diversity. The perceived risk of adopting measures that improve gender equality decreases, making other political institutions more willing to pursue such policies.³⁵ Therefore, not only the upper echelons of executive and judicial institutions, but also broader state institutions become more receptive to gender equality measures, viewing them as a low-risk strategy aligned with the practices demonstrated by legislative institutions. This promotes the wider adoption of gender equality in state institutions.³⁶

Third, the need for legitimacy drives the impact of gender quotas beyond legislative bodies, as Thames and Williams suggest.³⁷ Greater gender diversity is associated with higher perceived legitimacy.³⁸ For institutions lacking direct electoral legitimacy – such as the judiciary and non-elected parts of the executive branch encompassing most of the state apparatus – legitimacy is pivotal in securing adherence to policies and decision.³⁹ By providing equal access to jobs in state institutions for qualified candidates, regardless of gender, these bodies can enhance their legitimacy – which helps strengthen their position vis-à-vis other political institutions.

Effects based on regime type

Main hypothesis

The significance of quotas' contagious effects from the legislature to state institutions likely varies by regime type. In democracies, contagious representation may occur through legislative power, decreasing risk perception, and the pursuit of legitimacy. However, in autocracies these channels are likely to operate differently.

At the *institutional* level, the leader controls the legislature in autocracies.⁴⁰ As a result, parliamentarians typically lack the power to independently deliberate, legislate, or exercise budgetary control to advance gender equality in other institutions. Other authoritarian institutions, such as the state bureaucracy, are unlikely to replicate the legislature's approach to gender equality due to a decrease in the perceived risks. In autocracies, even when legislative institutions implement gender quotas, the perceived risk of increasing female representation in other political institutions may remain high. Autocracies may use gender quotas to project a progressive image or deflect international pressure without genuinely altering gender imbalances.⁴¹ However, extending gender equality to other institutions, like the state bureaucracy, could be perceived as threatening the autocratic leadership's control. State institutions in autocracies often serve as key instruments of authoritarian power. They disseminate crucial resources and are designed to maintain autocratic rule.⁴² Increasing gender equality in state jobs could therefore challenge the established hierarchies of co-opted ruling elites. This could create opportunities for women's mobilization, potentially threatening authoritarian regimes.⁴³

Since authoritarian state bureaucracies primarily seek legitimacy from the regime leadership rather than the general public, as discussed previously, autocracies can sometimes surpass democracies in performance indicators such as efficiency and economic growth, but not in responsiveness and procedural fairness.⁴⁴ The channels for articulating citizen demands (and state institutions' responsiveness to those demands) are severely restricted, as is the imperative to ensure equal treatment for all citizens.⁴⁵ State institutions prioritize meeting regime demands rather than popular demands or legitimizing their actions through fair representation,⁴⁶ and often lack the incentive to actively promote gender equality even when legislative gender quotas are implemented.

At the *individual* level, authoritarian regimes have often used gender quotas in parliaments to strengthen their control while appearing progressive.⁴⁷ By introducing these quotas, autocratic leaders bring women into legislative institutions; yet they select those most likely to be loyal to the regime.⁴⁸ This approach excludes less compliant candidates and reduces potential criticism, under the pretense of promoting gender equality.⁴⁹ Female legislators appointed through these mechanisms often feel indebted to the regime for their positions and have few alternative opportunities. They are thus unlikely to advocate broader equality in state institutions unless it aligns with the regime's interests. Rather than fostering genuine gender equality, these co-opted female legislators tend to reinforce the existing power structures and serve as agents of the authoritarian regime.

Therefore, legislative gender quotas in autocracies are unlikely to generate contagious representation. Consequently, they may not significantly increase women's representation in state institutions. This leads to our main hypothesis: Legislative gender quotas generate an increase in gender-equal access to state jobs in democracies, but not autocracies.

Alternative hypothesis

Past work suggests that autocracies may adopt legislative gender quotas and promote more equal access to state jobs for both ideological and instrumental reasons.⁵⁰ Ideologically, leftist authoritarian regimes have historically promoted women's inclusion in political institutions, in line with their core ideology. Instrumentally, autocratic regimes have exploited gender quotas and equal access to state jobs by "gender washing" to strengthen their legitimacy vis-à-vis opposition groups, citizens, civil society, and the international community.⁵¹

Autocratic leaders may manipulate electoral systems by implementing gender quotas to limit genuine competition from opposition groups while appearing to promote democratic principles. For example, the ruling party in Tanzania increased the number of "special seats" for women based on the proportion of votes each party receives.⁵² While this system improved female representation, it disadvantages geographically concentrated opposition parties and undermines their electoral strength. By carefully designing electoral rules that include gender quotas, authoritarian regimes can marginalize opposition groups under the guise of promoting gender equality.

In addition, autocratic leaders have implemented gender-equal policies to secure popular support, especially among women. The Ugandan government promoted gender equality beginning in the 1990s to secure women's support for its authoritarian regime.⁵³ Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika similarly introduced gender quotas

in 2012 to increase women's representation in the legislature, appealing to the population's desire for social progress.⁵⁴ The quotas projected an image of progress that strengthened the regime's internal and external legitimacy – and obscured Bouteflika's restrictions on civil liberties. Likewise, in the United Arab Emirates, recent initiatives such as the National Policy for the Empowerment of Emirati Women, legislative reforms to combat workplace discrimination, and efforts to increase women's representation in leadership roles have helped broaden the regime's support base and enhance its domestic and international legitimacy.⁵⁵

According to Donno and Kreff's theory, authoritarian regimes – particularly those with institutionalized party systems – advance women's rights in order to stabilize politically and build coalitions. By co-opting women through expanding their economic and political rights, these regimes bolster their support base without the risk of empowering the opposition associated with “coordination goods” like civil liberties. This theory found empirical support using data covering the period 1963–2009, combined with in-depth case studies of Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya.⁵⁶ Thus, increasing women's access to legislative positions and state employment is likely to broaden the support base of authoritarian regimes among women.

While promoting gender equality, autocratic regimes may advance support from civil society organizations *and* repress them at the same time. For instance, while Bouteflika expanded women's rights in Algeria, the government restricted civil society organizations' access to foreign funding and shut some of them down.⁵⁷ This demonstrates how autocrats can use gender reforms, including quotas and equal access to jobs, to appease some elements of civil society while tightening control over other parts.

Autocrats also use gender quotas to gain international prestige and secure foreign aid. By presenting themselves as supporters of gender equality through quotas and equal job access policies, they can deflect criticism of their undemocratic practices. For example, Cameroonian President Paul Biya established a Ministry of Women's Affairs and introduced quotas following the 1995 Beijing Declaration,⁵⁸ which helped him secure over 19 billion USD in aid. A comprehensive survey experiment in the US and Sweden establishes that citizens of democratic countries perceive autocracies with higher levels of gender equality as more democratic,⁵⁹ which can increase their willingness to provide aid to these regimes. In a related study, Bush, Donno, and Zetterberg⁶⁰ provide microfoundational evidence using a conjoint experiment. They demonstrate that Western aid donors associate gender equality policies with democratic norms: countries that adopt these policies are more likely to receive aid.

Autocracies that seek to promote gender equality have the capacity to rapidly implement gender quotas as well as gender-equal policies that enhance women's access to state jobs.⁶¹ Autocracies' centralized power structures allow them to enact wide-ranging reforms more swiftly than democracies, where opposition groups and legislative processes often create friction.⁶² Through decrees or mandates, autocracies can quickly adjust civil service hiring practices to promote gender equality. This suggests that autocracies, like democracies, may also contagiously implement policies ensuring equal access to state jobs following the introduction of gender quotas, reflecting both ideological and instrumental interests. Taken together, our alternative hypothesis posits that: Legislative gender quotas increase gender-equal access to state jobs in both democracies and autocracies.

Data

We assembled a panel dataset containing data from 160 countries, from 1981 (which marked a substantial uptick in the number of legislative quotas introduced) to 2020. [Figure 1](#) illustrates the total number of quotas implemented across regime types during the study period, which captures most quotas that have been introduced. Appendix Section B lists the countries in the dataset by quota and regime type (as of the most recent year in the data) and details how the variables were coded.

Our independent variable, *QUOTAS*, is binary. Following Hughes et al.⁶³ and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA),⁶⁴ we code quotas as “implemented” if full compliance was achieved within the first electoral cycle after their adoption. Our dependent variable, *GENDER EQUALITY IN ACCESS TO STATE JOBS*, captures the extent to which equally qualified individuals have equal access to state employment, regardless of their gender. It is drawn from the V-Dem exclusion indicators⁶⁵ and ranges from -2.45 to 3.49 . It was originally coded on an ordinal scale with the following categories: extremely unequal, unequal, somewhat equal, relatively equal, and equal. This ordinal scale was then converted to an interval scale via a measurement model to minimize measurement error.

This variable is constructed to account for the influence of qualifications and merit-based hiring of state employees. Since the variable is distinct from broader measures of democracy, such as those generated by Freedom House and Polity2, it does not reflect general variations in regime type based on electoral or liberal dimensions. The gender-equal access index is particularly robust to coder bias due to the high observability of this measure, especially compared to indices that assess equal access to state jobs for different socioeconomic groups, which can be more challenging to evaluate at the macro level.⁶⁶

The variable measuring gender-equal access to state (civil service) jobs is not designed to measure women’s access to elected office. Nevertheless, to test any potential overlap, we correlated the variable with the percentages of female ministers and legislators. The

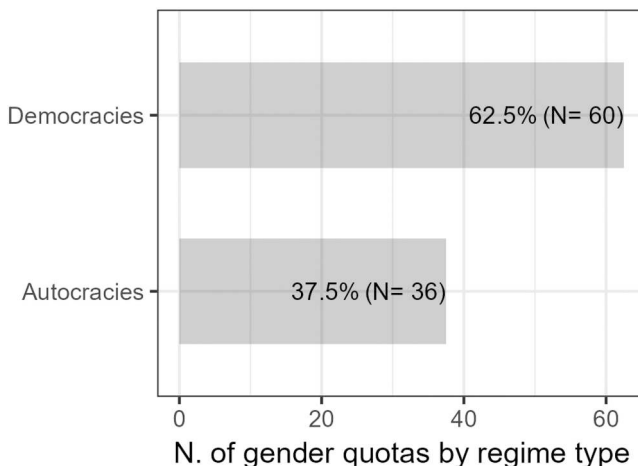


Figure 1. Quota implementation across regime types.

resulting correlation coefficients of 0.26 and 0.27, respectively, suggest a weak association (as might be expected in societies with broader commitments to gender equality); the variable's scope likely does not extend to gender-equal access to elected office. To further address the concern that our measure might be capturing gender-equal access to elected office related to quotas, we conducted a robustness test following the main result. The results further demonstrate that the finding is unlikely to be driven by endogeneity or any potential correlation with equal access to elected office.

We define *DEMOCRACY* according to the Boix, Miller, and Rosato (BMR) definition⁶⁷ and use the updated version of the BMR Dichotomous Coding of Democracy (version 4.0), which covers the period up to 2020. To isolate the effect, we include key control variables. We control for *GDP* in all models with controls using data from the World Bank's World Development Indicators (WDI);⁶⁸ *GDP* is measured in constant US dollars to account for inflation or deflation and facilitate macro-level comparisons. Accounting for economic strength is crucial, as countries with weaker economies often exhibit lower levels of gender equality overall.⁶⁹ Moreover, a stronger economy can create more employment opportunities and reduce labour market competition, potentially increasing equality in access to state jobs. To account for how globalization and economic openness affect gender equality, we control for foreign direct investment (*FDI*) and *TRADE*. Both are calculated as a percentage of *GDP* using WDI data; *FDI* denotes net inflows, and trade is the sum of imports and exports.

We also control for official development assistance (*ODA*) as a percentage of *GDP* because prior work has demonstrated that autocrats may strategically implement quotas and other gender equality measures to gain favour with international donors or improve their image abroad.⁷⁰ This measure allows us to compare the amount of *ODA* received by countries with different sized economies, using WDI data. Finally, to account for potential partisan bias, we introduce the continuous variable *LEFTISM*, which indicates how left leaning the current government is, using data from Tannenberget al.⁷¹ (also available in *V-Dem*).⁷² This helps prevent us from overestimating the impact of the quotas, since left-leaning parties are often more likely to implement quota policies and to promote gender equality in state employment.

Additionally, we control for *WOMEN'S LEGISLATIVE REPRESENTATION*, a continuous variable denoting the percentage of seats held by women in national legislatures. We obtained this data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union.⁷³ We also account for *WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN MINISTERIAL POSITIONS* using data from WhoGov.⁷⁴

The control variables *ODA*, *GDP*, *FDI*, and *TRADE* are log-transformed and lagged by 1 year. We also include year and country fixed effects to control for unobserved heterogeneity, such as gender norms, that can influence both quota implementation and gender equality in access to state jobs. Appendix Section A presents further details regarding the dataset, including descriptive statistics and variable definitions.

Analyses

The overall quota effect

We begin by examining quotas' overall effects on gender-equal access to state jobs. We employ a staggered DID design because countries introduce quotas at different times.

The model specification is as follows:

$$Y_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \sum_{i=1}^k D_{ik} + \mu_{it} + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

where Y_{it} is the dependent variable denoting gender-equal access to state jobs for country i in year t ; D_{ik} is a binary treatment indicator that equals 1 if country i implements a quota in period k (where $k \geq t$); μ_{it} is a vector of time-varying control variables for country i ; and ε_{it} is an error term.

The empirical findings presented in Table 1 support our main hypothesis – that gender quotas have differentiated effects on gender-equal access to state jobs across regime types. Consistent with this hypothesis, gender quotas significantly increase this access in democracies by an average of 0.13.⁷⁵

In autocracies, by contrast, quotas do not produce contagious effects beyond the legislature, which we attribute to the limited power of authoritarian parliaments, persistent risk aversion, and such regimes' limited need for legitimacy. These results challenge the alternative hypothesis that quotas promote gender-equal access to state positions across regime types, including broader contagious effects in autocracies. The empirical evidence instead establishes that autocratic leaders predominantly implement legislative gender quotas as symbolic or controlled reforms, and disincentivize systemic measures to improve gender equality across the political system.

Appendix Section C shows that the dependent variable, gender-equal access to state jobs, follows parallel trends before and after quotas were implemented in both democracies and autocracies, indicating similar pre-quota conditions across regime types. This makes it unlikely that factors beyond the quotas are driving the contagious effect we observe in democracies. The absence of significant fluctuations in either regime type in the years immediately before a quota was introduced (Appendix

Table 1. Quotas' effects on gender-equal access to state jobs.

	Full sample		Democracy		Autocracy	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Quotas	0.086*** (0.013)	0.095*** (0.013)	0.130*** (0.014)	0.128*** (0.015)	-0.016 (0.019)	0.011 (0.021)
Democracy		0.200*** (0.014)				
ODA (% of GDP)		-0.154 (0.103)		0.032 (0.186)		-0.518*** (0.124)
GDP		0.020* (0.012)		0.117*** (0.020)		-0.035** (0.016)
FDI (% of GDP)		-0.001 (0.037)		-0.059* (0.035)		0.394*** (0.150)
Trade (% of GDP)		0.012 (0.014)		-0.011 (0.026)		0.016 (0.017)
Leftism		0.264*** (0.023)		0.135*** (0.027)		0.237*** (0.054)
Controls		✓		✓		✓
Country and year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	6,223	5,110	3,138	2,835	3,017	2,275
Adjusted R ²	0.942	0.951	0.953	0.955	0.933	0.926

Notes: Standard errors, in parentheses, are clustered at the country level.
+ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Section C) indicates that the DID analysis is unlikely to be biased by pre-existing trends. Additionally, Appendix Section E demonstrates that the main result is robust to both quota adoption and quota implementation. Appendix Section M presents a sensitivity analysis, which indicates that the results are unlikely to be affected by including or excluding sizable controls. Furthermore, Appendix Section J demonstrates the findings' robustness to quotas with 1- and 2-year lags, which indicates that it assuages reverse causality concerns. Appendix Section L illustrates that the findings are robust to excluding countries with populations under 1 million. In Appendix Section F, we examine the contagious effect of quotas moderated by GDP. Overall, this analysis supports our main findings of a significant effect only in democracies; the effect increases as GDP rises. Appendix Sections G and H demonstrate that the findings hold when using the original-coder's ordinal operationalization of the dependent variable.

One potential concern is that the observed increase in women's access to state jobs in democracies with quotas cannot be directly attributed to the quotas but rather to random societal and political shifts. To address this concern, we conducted a placebo test to rule out the possibility that unobserved cross-country differences could generate similar effects. We randomly assigned quotas to the same number of countries that implemented them in our sample and repeated this process 1,000 times. In each iteration, we estimated the effect on gender-equal access to state jobs in democracies. The distribution of these placebo estimates is centred around zero, which indicates that the random assignment of quotas generated no significant effects (Appendix Section I). This finding supports the argument that the observed contagious effects of quotas are attributable to the quotas themselves, and do not simply reflect unobserved cross-country variations.

Addressing endogeneity concerns

To further address potential endogeneity concerns that the presence of women in elected office is related to both our dependent variable (gender-equal access to state jobs) and our treatment variable (gender quotas), our models include the percentages of women legislators and ministers as additional controls. By controlling for women's representation in elected office, we adjust for its potential influence on our dependent variable. This allows us to attribute changes in gender-equal access to state jobs to the contagious effect of gender quotas, rather than to increased women's representation in elected office. Furthermore, it reduces the risk that omitted variables related to women's political power are confounding the relationship between gender quotas and gender-equal access to state jobs.

Figure 2 presents the effects with baseline controls, then with controls for female ministers, female legislators, as well as female ministers *and* legislators. The finding remains consistent with the main effect when controlling for all three scenarios. This test strengthens our confidence that the finding is not likely driven by endogeneity or a link between gender-equal access to state jobs and women's access to elected office.

Impact of different quota shocks

In this section we analyse how increased women's legislative representation due to quotas may moderate the contagious effect of gender quotas on gender-equal access

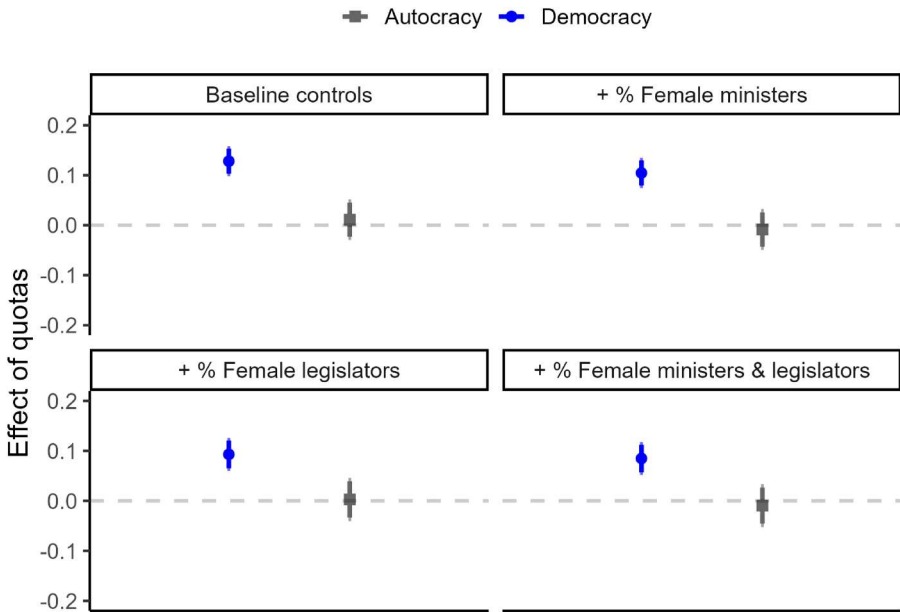


Figure 2. Quotas' effects on gender-equal access to state jobs (accounting for the proportion of female ministers and legislators).

Note: The models are based on models 4 and 6 in Table 1, with the addition of controls for the percentage of female ministers or legislators (or both).

to state jobs across regime types. Clayton and Zetterberg⁷⁶ were the first to distinguish between a “high quota shock” (quotas substantially increase women’s representation in the legislature) and a “low quota shock” (small increase).

Prior research has yielded mixed results regarding whether different quota shocks influence the extent of the contagious effect. Some studies argue that a high quota shock is needed to shift the legislature’s overall preferences.⁷⁷ Others have demonstrated that quotas do not only exert influence by increasing the number of women in the legislature. For example, Childs⁷⁸ finds that women are more likely to collaborate on gender equality issues when they constitute a minority in the legislature. When women are underrepresented in politics, they may feel a greater affinity with minority groups facing similar challenges. Clayton and Zetterberg⁷⁹ argue that high quota shocks can increase the salience of gender equality within the legislature and may reverberate more broadly throughout the political system.

We adopt Clayton and Zetterberg’s methodology to isolate the effects of gender quotas.⁸⁰ This involves constructing a measure of quota shock that quantifies the percentage-point change in women’s legislative representation during the first election after quota implementation. Following Clayton and Zetterberg, we then categorize quota implementation cases as causing a high (above-mean increase) or low (below-mean increase) shock. This allows us to examine whether quotas’ effect on gender-equal access to state jobs is driven directly by the quotas or indirectly through their depth. The mean quota shock in our data is a 6.62 and 9.37 percentage-point increase for democracies and autocracies, respectively.

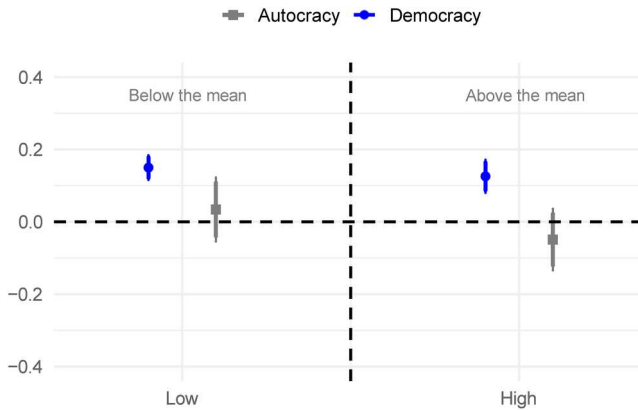


Figure 3. Heterogeneous impact of quota shocks.

Note: These models extend models 4 and 6 in Table 1 by adding subsampling based on quota depth.

Figure 3 shows that in democracies, the contagious effect of quotas remains significant for both high and low quota shocks. This indicates that quotas' contagious effect on increasing gender-equal access to jobs in state institutions is not driven solely by cases of high quota shocks; even low quota shocks have a similar contagious effect. Consistent with our main findings, we do not find that quotas have a contagious effect in autocracies, regardless of their depth.

These results indicate that quotas can have a direct contagious effect and improve gender equality across institutions in democracies without necessarily relying on increased women's legislative representation. Implementing quotas signals a strong commitment to gender equality,⁸¹ which pressures state institutions to follow suit. This finding supports the idea of contagious representation, particularly in democracies, where quotas have an impact beyond legislative institutions: they trigger the need for legitimacy and risk reduction across various institutions, rather than simply increasing the number of women in the legislature.⁸² Appendix Section K categorizes quota shocks using terciles (lower, medium, and higher) instead of the average definition proposed by Clayton and Zetterberg,⁸³ and the findings remain consistent.

Heterogeneous effect following a democratic transition

To further test the contagious effect of quotas across regime types, we examine the impact of a transition from autocracy to democracy. If regime type influences the contagious effect of quotas, we should observe a change following this transition. If quotas' effect on gender-equal access to state jobs is *independent* of regime type, we should not observe a contagious effect after a regime transition. Past studies have suggested that this effect is more pronounced after a democratic transition. For example, Hassim⁸⁴ notes that in many new African democracies, quota-elected legislators join forces with women's rights activists involved in democratic movements to increase gender equality in legislative arenas and beyond.

We then investigate the impact of democratic transitions on the contagious effect of quotas. To assess the effect before and after democratization, we employ a flexible DID

event-study model, focusing on an 8-year window around the transition to minimize heterogeneity. This captures the dynamic effects of democratization in countries with quotas compared to those without. We prefer this approach over a split-sample DID for increased data efficiency and a reduced risk of Type I errors.

The model is specified as follows:

$$\text{Gender-equal access to state jobs}_{it} = \sum_{t=(-8,-7]}^{(7,8]} \beta_t \text{Quota}_i \times \text{Year}_t + \alpha_i + \gamma_t + \theta_{it} + \epsilon_{it}$$

where Y_{it} represents gender-equal access to state jobs for country i in year t , and Quota_i is a binary indicator for quota implementation in country i . β_t are the period-specific coefficients capturing the DID effect between countries with and without quotas in year t , relative to the transition period ($t = 0$), which is set as the baseline. Country and year fixed effects (α_i and γ_t , respectively) are included, along with control variables (θ_{it}) and an error term (ϵ_{it}).

Figure 4 displays the model estimates over an 8-year window centred on transitions from autocracy to democracy. It reveals that quotas exert a contagious effect on gender-equal access to state jobs 3 years after such transitions. At that point, countries with quotas experience an average increase of 0.14 in gender-equal access compared to those without. This contagious effect grows to 0.24 after 8 years.⁸⁵ We observe no significant effect prior to democratization: the confidence intervals largely overlap zero. Appendix Section D reports the full results.

The delayed onset of the positive effect, observed 3 years after democratization, could be explained by the time required for institutional consolidation and for new democratic norms to take root.⁸⁶ The drafting of new constitutions or electoral laws during democratization, which often incorporate gender quotas (as in Argentina

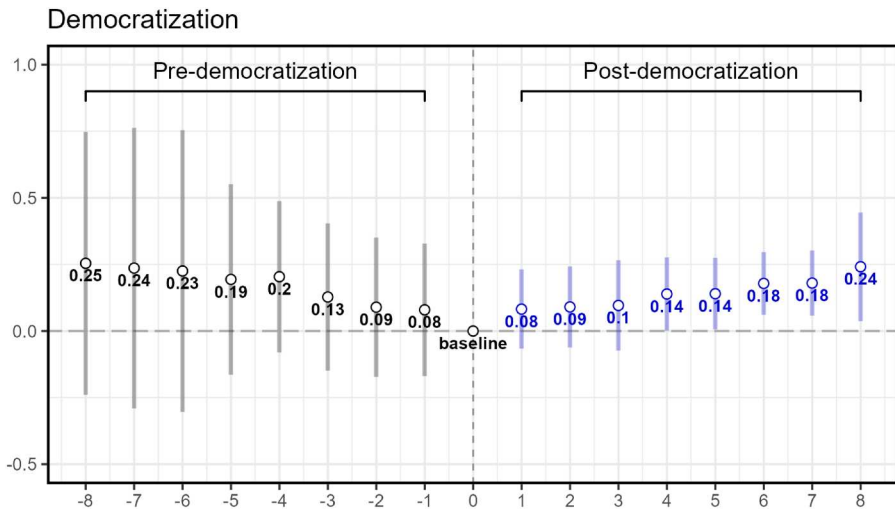


Figure 4. Estimates of pre- and post-democratization effects.

Note: The modelling strategy incorporates quotas as the treatment term and follows a flexible DID event-study approach with country-year fixed effects and controls. The figure plots the regression coefficients with 95% confidence intervals, capturing quota effects over time relative to baseline (year of quota implementation). Standard errors are clustered at the country level using a heteroskedasticity-robust covariance matrix.

and South Africa), can create a fertile ground for the quota effect to flourish in the post-transition period.

These findings provide further empirical support for our main hypothesis that the contagious effect of quotas differs based on regime type. Legislative gender quotas have a significantly positive impact on gender-equal access to state jobs only after a transition to democracy.

Conclusion

This study analyses the contagious effects of legislative gender quotas on gender-equal access to employment in state institutions. Grounded in theories of contagious representation⁸⁷ and scholarship on gender and political regimes,⁸⁸ we examine variations in these effects across democracies and autocracies. Our primary hypothesis posited that gender quotas are more likely to promote gender-equal employment in state institutions in democracies, facilitated by legislative power, shifts in institutional risk perception, and concerns about legitimacy. We did not expect quotas to exert a contagious effect in autocracies due to the lack of genuine legislative power, risk aversion, and limited need for broad institutional legitimacy. Indeed, this is what we observe. We analyse 40 years of panel data from 160 countries, and find that legislative gender quotas have a contagious impact and increase gender-equal access to state jobs in democracies, but not in autocracies. This finding supports the argument that quotas in democracies can create contagious representation by signalling strong support for cross-institutional gender equality, reducing the risk associated with increasing gender equality in state institutions, and supporting their legitimacy within the broader political system.

Our findings reject the alternative hypothesis that legislative gender quotas might also have a contagious effect on promoting gender-equal employment in state institutions in autocracies, for ideological reasons or to enhance the regime's international and domestic support through gender washing.⁸⁹

Our findings are robust to a series of additional tests and controls for potential endogeneity related to women's representation in elected office. The analysis of low and high quota shocks establishes that quotas' contagious effect in democracies does *not* depend on how much women's legislative representation increases. This suggests that contagious representation is driven by the quotas themselves, and is not a byproduct of increased women's legislative representation. Examining the effect of quotas before and after periods of democratization further supports our findings. The positive contagious effect emerges only *after* democratization, and becomes significant 3 years later. This reinforces our contention that democracies, but not autocracies, experience this effect.

These findings emphasize the importance of regime type in shaping the contagious effects of legislative gender quotas. In democracies, quotas promote gender equality across institutions, underscoring their interconnectedness within the political system. Yet in autocracies, they do not produce comparable effects across institutions. Future research could investigate the micro-level mechanisms purported to drive these effects in democracies and assess the extent to which they are obstructed in autocracies.

Notes

1. Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Gender Quotas Database."

2. Franceschet and Piscopo, "Gender Quotas and Women's Substantive Representation"; Schwindt-Bayer, "Still Supermadres?"; Wang, Suen, "Do Women Always Represent Women."
3. Mechkova and Edgell, "Substantive Representation, Women's Health, and Regime Type"; Mechkova, Dahlum, and Petrarca, "Women's Political Representation, Good Governance and Human Development."
4. Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, "How Autocrats Weaponize Women's Rights"; Donno, "Authoritarian Regimes and Women's Rights"; Bush, Donno, and Zetterberg, "International Rewards for Gender Equality Reforms in Autocracies."
5. Thames and Williams, *Contagious Representation*.
6. Bush, Donno, and Zetterberg, "International Rewards for Gender Equality Reforms in Autocracies"; Mechkova, Dahlum, and Petrarca, "Women's Political Representation, Good Governance and Human Development."
7. Sigman and Lindberg, "Democracy for All"; Coppedge et al., "V-Dem v14."
8. Coppedge et al., "V-Dem v14."
9. Thames and Williams, *Contagious Representation*.
10. Clayton, "How do Electoral Gender Quotas Affect Policy?"; Krook, Lovenduski, and Squires, "Gender Quotas and Models of Political Citizenship."
11. Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, "How Autocrats Weaponize Women's Rights."
12. Frantz and Kendall-Taylor, "A Dictator's Toolkit."
13. Donno and Kreft, "Authoritarian Institutions and Women's Rights"; Donno, "Authoritarian Regimes and Women's Rights."
14. Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, "How Autocrats Weaponize Women's Rights."
15. Ibid.; Bush, Donno, and Zetterberg, "International Rewards for Gender Equality Reforms in Autocracies."
16. Edgell, "Foreign Aid, Democracy, and Gender Quota Laws."
17. Sigman and Lindberg, "Democracy for All"; Acemoglu et al., "Democracy Does Cause Growth."
18. Clayton and Zetterberg, "Quota Shocks."
19. Fallon, Swiss, and Viterna, "Resolving the Democracy Paradox"; Hassim, "Perverse Consequences?"; Walsh, "Does the Quality of Democracy Matter for Women's Rights?"; Clayton, "How do Electoral Gender Quotas Affect Policy?"
20. Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, "How Autocrats Weaponize Women's Rights"; Zetterberg et al., "Democracy and the Adoption of Electoral Gender Quotas Worldwide."
21. Krook, Lovenduski, and Squires, "Gender Quotas and Models of Political Citizenship."
22. Ibid.
23. Lowande, Ritchie, and Lauterbach, "Descriptive and Substantive Representation in Congress."
24. Matland and Studlar, "The Contagion of Women Candidates in Single-member District and Proportional Representation Electoral Systems."
25. Thames and Williams, *Contagious Representation*.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. O'Brien and Rickne, "Gender Quotas and Women's Political Leadership."
29. Ibid.
30. Kerevel, "Empowering Women?"
31. Clayton and Zetterberg, "Quota Shocks," see also O'Brien and Rickne, "Gender Quotas."
32. Franceschet and Piscopo, "Gender Quotas and Women's Substantive Representation."
33. Paxton, Hughes, and Barnes, *Women, Politics, and Power*.
34. Thames and Williams, *Contagious Representation*.
35. Baldez, "Elected Bodies"; Caul, "Political Parties and the Adoption of Candidate Gender Quotas"; Krook, "Gender Quotas, Norms, and Politics"; Matland, *Electoral Quotas*; Matland and Studlar, "The Contagion of Women Candidates in Single-member District and Proportional Representation Electoral Systems."
36. Lean et al., "Women's Civic and Political Participation in the Developing World"; Rubio-Marín, "Women's Participation in the Public Domain under Human Rights Law."
37. Thames and Williams, *Contagious Representation*.
38. Ibid.
39. Zürn, "How Non-majoritarian Institutions Make Silent Majorities Vocal."

40. Lührmann, Marquardt, and Mechkova, “Constraining Governments.”
41. Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, “How Autocrats Weaponize Women’s Rights”; Bush, Donno, and Zetterberg, “International Rewards for Gender Equality Reforms in Autocracies.”
42. Gandhi and Przeworski, “Authoritarian Institutions and the Survival of Autocrats”; Reny, “Autocracies and the Control of Societal Organizations.”
43. Waylen, “Women’s Mobilization and Gender Outcomes in Transitions to Democracy.”
44. Gerschewski, “Legitimacy in Autocracies.”
45. Escribà-Folch, “Repression, Political Threats, and Survival under Autocracy.”
46. Gandhi and Przeworski, “Authoritarian Institutions and the Survival of Autocrats.”
47. Bush, Donno, and Zetterberg, “International Rewards for Gender Equality Reforms in Autocracies.”
48. Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, “How Autocrats Weaponize Women’s Rights”; Bush, Donno, and Zetterberg, “International Rewards for Gender Equality Reforms in Autocracies.”
49. Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, “How Autocrats Weaponize Women’s Rights.”
50. *Ibid.*; Bush, Donno, and Zetterberg, “International Rewards for Gender Equality Reforms in Autocracies.”
51. The following description builds on Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, “How Autocrats Weaponize Women’s Rights.”
52. Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, “How Autocrats Weaponize Women’s Rights”; Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, “Gender Equality Reforms on an Uneven Playing Field.”
53. Tripp, *Musevenis Uganda*.
54. Tripp, *Seeking Legitimacy*.
55. United Arab Emirates Government, *National Policy for Empowerment of Emirati Women 2023–2031*.
56. Donno and Kreft, “Authoritarian Institutions and Women’s Rights.”
57. Tripp, *Seeking Legitimacy*.
58. Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, “How Autocrats Weaponize Women’s Rights.”
59. Bush and Zetterberg, “Gender Quotas and International Reputation.”
60. Bush, Donno, and Zetterberg, “International Rewards for Gender Equality Reforms in Autocracies.”
61. Johnson, “Authoritarian Gender Equality Policy Making.”
62. Croissant and Wurster, “Performance and Persistence of Autocracies in Comparison”; Stasavage, “Democracy, Autocracy, and Emergency Threats.”
63. Hughes et al., “Global Gender Quota Adoption, Implementation, and Reform.”
64. International IDEA, *Global Database of Gender Quota (International IDEA and Inter-Parliamentary Union and Stockholm University)*.
65. Sigman and Lindberg, “Democracy for All”; Coppedge et al., “V-Dem v14.”
66. Sigman and Lindberg, “Democracy for All.”
67. Boix, Miller, and Rosato, “Boix-Miller-Rosato (BMR) Dichotomous Coding of Democracy, 1800–2020.”
68. WDI, *World Development Indicators*.
69. Inglehart and Norris, *Rising Tide*.
70. Bush and Zetterberg, “Gender Quotas and International Reputation.”
71. Tannenberget al., “Claiming the Right to Rule.”
72. Coppedge et al., “V-Dem v14.”
73. IPU, “Women in National Parliaments.”
74. Nyrup and Bramwell, “Who Governs?”
75. An effect size of 0.13 corresponds to approximately 2.2% of the full scale range. Although seemingly modest in absolute terms, these shifts are both statistically significant (i.e. unlikely due to random chance) and substantively meaningful. For further interpretation of this effect, see Appendix Section H.
76. Clayton and Zetterberg, “Quota Shocks.”
77. O’Brien and Rickne, “Gender Quotas and Women’s Political Leadership.”
78. Childs, *New Labour’s Woman MPs*.
79. Clayton and Zetterberg, “Quota Shocks.”
80. *Ibid.*
81. Clayton and Anderson-Nilsson, “Gender Experiments in Comparative Politics.”

82. Baldez, “Elected Bodies”; Thames and Williams, *Contagious Representation*.
83. Clayton and Zetterberg, “Quota Shocks.”
84. Hassim, “Perverse Consequences?” 239.
85. Notably, an effect size of 0.24 corresponds to approximately 4% of the full scale range.
86. Fallon, Swiss, and Viterna, “Resolving the Democracy Paradox.”
87. Thames and Williams, *Contagious Representation*.
88. Bush, Donno, and Zetterberg, “International Rewards for Gender Equality Reforms in Autocracies”; Mechkova, Dahlum, and Petrarca, “Women’s Political Representation, Good Governance and Human Development.”
89. Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, “How Autocrats Weaponize Women’s Rights”; Donno and Kreft, “Authoritarian Institutions and Women’s Rights”; Donno, “Authoritarian Regimes and Women’s Rights.”

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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