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# *Quotas as a 'Fast Track' to Equal Representation for Women*

WHY SCANDINAVIA IS NO LONGER THE MODEL

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## Abstract

Recent years have witnessed the rapid diffusion of electoral gender quotas. Today, about forty countries around the world have introduced gender quotas for parliamentary elections, either by constitutional amendment or electoral law. Also, quotas for public election have been laid down in major political parties' statutes in more than fifty countries. This article, which is based on the first worldwide overview of the use of quotas, presents general trends in quota adoption. It identifies two discourses: the incremental track versus the fast track to women's parliamentary representation, and argues that the Scandinavian countries – which represent the incremental track – may no longer be a valid model for ways to improve women's representation. The article also analyses the implementation process, and concludes that, without specifications of quota provisions that match the electoral system in question, and rules about the rank order of candidates as well as sanctions for non-compliance, quota provisions may be merely symbolic.

## Keywords

election, fast track, incremental track, parliament, quotas, representation, women

## INTRODUCTION

Although highly controversial, electoral gender quotas are being introduced in an increasing number of countries in all the major regions of the world. About forty countries have already introduced gender quotas for parliamentary elections by constitutional amendment or electoral law, most of them in recent years. In more than fifty countries, quotas requiring that a certain minimum of the parties' candidates for election to national parliament must be women

are now stipulated in major political parties' own statutes. This development challenges previous theories of variations in women's political representation.

In the Latin American debate, the very high representation of women in Scandinavian parliaments has been used to support the introduction of electoral gender quotas, first in Argentina and later in several other Latin American countries.<sup>1</sup> This example is somewhat misleading, however, because in Denmark, Norway and Sweden, quota provisions were first introduced in the 1980s, when women already occupied 20–30 per cent of seats in parliament, which was already the highest in the world at the time. The real take-off for women's representation in the Scandinavian countries occurred in the 1970s, before the introduction of any quotas.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, electoral quotas have always been voluntary in Scandinavia, never a legal requirement, and only used by some political parties.

This historical development led to the realization that empowering women through quotas would require a strong power base. Because of strong resistance, it was assumed that the introduction of quota systems would be difficult or even impossible if women did not already have a solid power base in parliament and in the political parties (Dahlerup 1988a). In the Scandinavian countries, quotas were seen as a *critical act* by a large minority of women to *consolidate* women's representation and make way for more elected women (Dahlerup 1988b). In general, the Scandinavian countries come close to what we in this article refer to as *the incremental track* to equal political representation for women and men. It took approximately sixty years for Denmark, Norway and Sweden to cross the 20 per cent threshold, and seventy years to reach 30 per cent. Today, women's movements are unwilling to wait so long.

In this article, we contrast the Scandinavian development with that in countries that represent what we call *the fast track*. Today, quotas are introduced in countries where women only constitute a small minority in parliament, and we are now witnessing historical leaps in women's representation, e.g. from 19 to 35 per cent women in parliament in one election (Costa Rica), or 30 per cent women elected in the very first democratic parliamentary election (South Africa).

Major historical leaps in women's parliamentary representation can occur without quota provisions, just as the mere introduction of quotas has not resulted in uniform increases in the numbers of women parliamentarians worldwide. However, this article focuses on electoral gender quotas as an affirmative action measure to increase women's representation. First, the article identifies two discourses: the incremental track versus the fast track to women's parliamentary representation. Second, it outlines the amazing new development in the introduction of quotas worldwide. Third, it analyses the troublesome implementation process. Finally, the article discusses the implications of the incremental versus the fast track in terms of women's empowerment. The conclusion is that, today, the Scandinavian countries may no longer be the model, at any rate not the only model, for ways to improve women's political representation. The introduction of a fast track, notably the introduction of legal electoral

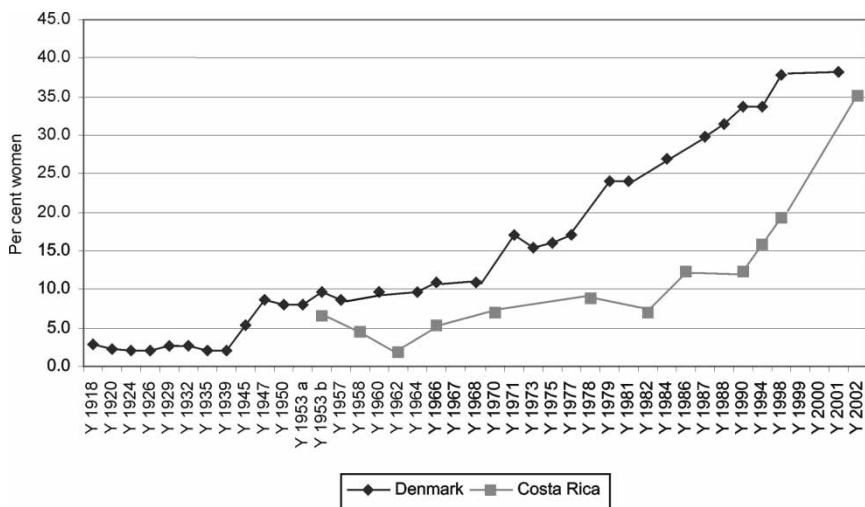
quotas in Latin American and other Third World countries, may represent an alternative and faster model, though this may also have its problems.<sup>3</sup>

The article is based on the first worldwide overview of the use of quotas (www.quotaproject.org).<sup>4</sup> Here, only electoral gender quotas are discussed, defined as legal rules (constitutional or legislative) or internal party regulations setting a minimum proportion of women, or both sexes, in the political parties' candidates for public election or among those elected.<sup>5</sup>

## THE FAST TRACK VERSUS THE INCREMENTAL TRACK

The recent expansion of quota provisions throughout the world points to new routes to equal political representation for women, which differ from previous experiences. Figure 1 shows what we call the fast versus the incremental track to high representation for women. By means of a strong quota regulation (40 per cent) and forceful implementation procedures, women's representation in Costa Rica's parliament jumped overnight from 19 to 35 per cent in 2002. In Denmark, where 38 per cent of members of parliament are women (2001 election), the same move took twenty years of incremental increase over eight elections. It should be mentioned that there had already been a gradual increase in women's representation in Costa Rica during the last two decades, before the introduction of quotas.

So far, the concepts of fast versus incremental tracks have been used to characterize two different empirical routes to high political representation for



<sup>a</sup> No information from the 1974 election in Costa Rica.

(1953a and b) – Two general elections took place in Denmark.

Figure 1 Women's parliamentary representation in Costa Rica and Denmark (Percentage)

women. But the discussion of the use of quotas touches on very central issues in feminist theory and feminist advocacy. Figure 2 shows the two tracks as two different discourses – constructed as ideal types. Both discourses advocate equal representation for women, but their general perception of the historical and the future development varies, as does their identification of both the causes of under-representation and understanding of women's under-representation as a problem, and the proposed strategies. Actual discourses might be analysed in terms of how close they come to these ideal types, and to what extent

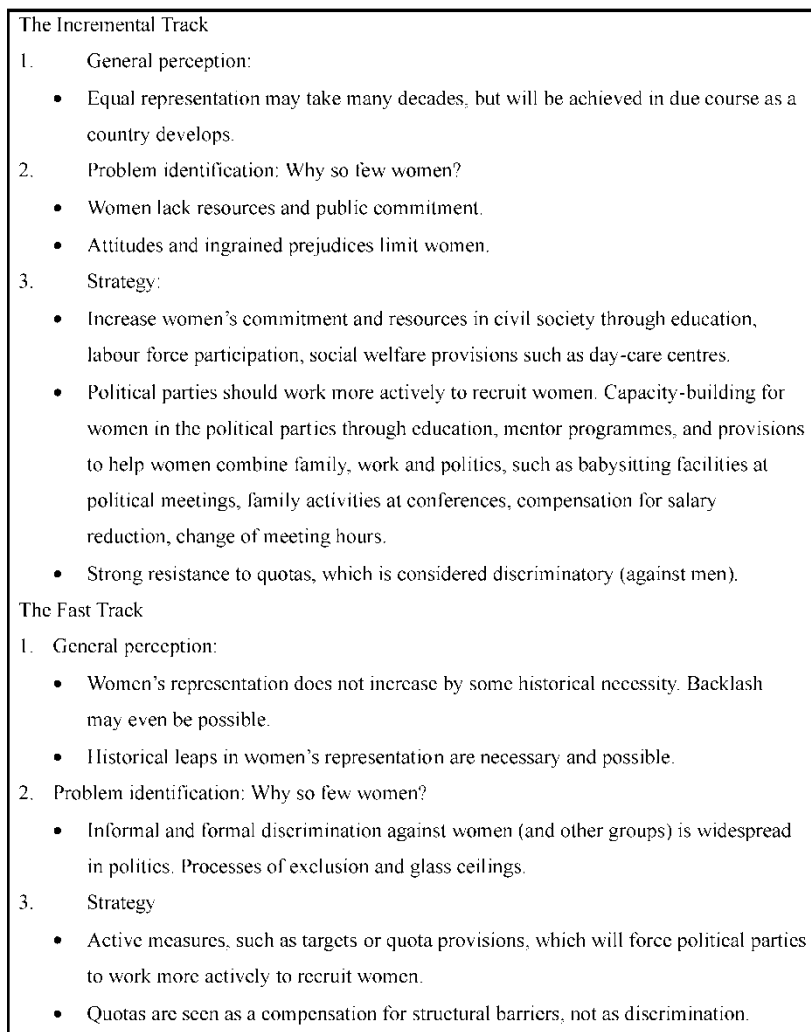


Figure 2 Two tracks to equal political representation

actual policymaking rests on such a logical coherence between the perception of the problem and the choice of strategies that the model implies.

According to the incremental track discourse, the primary problem is that women do not have the same political resources as men. While there is prejudice against women, this will eventually disappear as society develops. There is thus an inherent concept of gradualism, leading to strategies such as women's capacity-building and parties' responsibilities to recruit more women.

From a liberal perspective, quotas as a specific group right conflict with the principle of equal opportunity for all. Explicitly favouring certain groups of citizens, i.e. women, means that not all citizens (men) are given an equal chance to attain a political career. The incremental track discourse thus points to the reluctance to give specific categories the right to a guaranteed number of representatives based on their specificity, preferring equal opportunity to equal results. Concerns about the multiplicity of categories and groups that might claim quota provisions have also been raised (Maier and Klausen 2001), as well as arguments focusing on social cohesion, accountability and fear of fractionalization (Phillips 1995).

In contrast, the fast track discourse rejects the idea of gradual improvement in women's representation. It is even assumed that an increase in resources might not automatically lead to equal representation. Exclusion and discrimination are regarded as the core of problem identification and understanding, the solution to which could very well be affirmative action. The fast track discourse represents the impatience of today's feminists, who are not willing to wait seventy to eighty years to achieve their goals. The gradualism of the Nordic countries might be seen as having been relevant in earlier historical periods, but not today. Since the political parties are the real gatekeepers, they are the ones capable of increasing the proportion of nominated women candidates by defining formal rules that prescribe a certain proportion of women among the party's candidates. According to this understanding of women's underrepresentation, mandated quotas for the recruitment and election of female candidates, possibly also including time-limit provisions, are needed.

Advocating the use of quotas thus represents a shift from one concept of equality to another. The incremental track is associated with the classic liberal notion of equality – 'equal opportunity' or 'competitive equality' – whereas quotas represent a shift towards 'equality of results'. According to some nineteenth-century authors, e.g. John Stuart Mill (1869), the removal of the formal barriers to women's political participation by giving women the vote was considered sufficient. It was then up to individual women to act. Gradually, even the liberal notion shifted towards a demand for de facto opportunities or 'real equal opportunities', according to which real, not just formal, equal opportunities must be guaranteed from the start in order to secure fair competition. As a result of strong pressure from the women's movement and international organizations in the last few decades, and the slow development in women's representation in general, the concept of equality of results has gained increasing relevance and support, based on the understanding that direct discrimination

and a complex pattern of hidden barriers prevent women from attaining a fair share of political power and influence. Consequently, quotas and other measures aimed at increasing the level of women's political participation are thus regarded as a means towards equality of results – or at least real opportunity for an equal number of women and men candidates to meet the voters. If barriers exist, compensatory measures must be introduced as a means to achieve equality of results. In this perspective, we will argue that quotas are not discrimination (against men), but a compensation for structural barriers that women face in the electoral process. Carol Bacchi (2004) warns against using the notion of 'preferential treatment', because this implies that the present social rules are generally fair. Thus, quotas as a fast track not only challenge the Scandinavian model of women's representation, they also question the concept of equal opportunity by giving the concept of equality new significance and implications.

### Women as a Group

Electoral gender quotas also touch on the current theoretical debate about 'women as a group' and draw attention to the problem of whether it is theoretically acceptable to continue saying 'we' about a single category of women. One may argue that women as a group are both the Achilles' heel of the feminist movement and its *raison d'être*. The present critique within feminist theory is partly a critique of western ethnocentrism, stressing the principle of multiple identities, and partly a post-structuralist critique that feminism tends to construct the very category it wants to dissolve (Benhabib *et al.* 1995). Do quotas construct women as the second sex, and thus contribute to a reproduction of stereotyped gender roles and a stigmatization of women? We will argue that, rather than using static concepts of 'essentialism', the dilemmas and strategic choices of women in various contexts should be explored empirically. Research on quotas must therefore empirically analyse which groups of women are involved in the promotion of quotas as well as their alliances with men. The demand for quotas has led to vehement debates in many countries; quota controversies thus represent an interesting subject for future comparative research (see Bacchi 1996; Squires 1996; Dahlerup 1998; Gaspard 2001; Marques-Pereira 2001; Sineau 2002; Skjeie 2002; Borchorst and Christensen 2003).

Thus, there are several conflicting discourses on gender electoral quotas, both in theory and practice. Within the Nordic research community, some scholars see women's under-representation as a question of a 'time lag', implying that women will get an equal share of seats in political institutions as they increase their general integration into the public sphere (Karvonen and Selle 1995). Other researchers, including the authors of this article, argue that a backlash is possible, even in the Nordic countries, because gender inequality is not just an historical relic, but may be (re)produced in modern settings. Consequently, quotas are a possible remedy to the mechanisms of exclusion.

In recent years, countries around the world have implemented constitutional quotas and/or quota regulations by law for elections to national parliament, see Table 1. As the table shows, quota provisions are found in many different political systems, including countries with less democratic elections.

Depending on how difficult it is to amend a constitution, quotas by law are generally less robust than constitutional quota systems. At the implementation stage, the difference between the two different kinds of legal basis is insignificant, however. As Table 1 demonstrates, democratic countries with constitutional quotas have usually laid down quota regulations in the electoral law as well. A simple division between *legal quotas* (constitutional and/or by law) and *party quotas* thus seems adequate.

Major political parties in more than fifty countries have now included quota regulations in their own by-laws, requiring a certain minimum proportion of women on the party's candidate list ([www.quotaproject.org](http://www.quotaproject.org)). Numerous parties have passed recommendations, but only formal regulations are included here. It is evident that in countries with legal quota provisions (constitutional and/or by-law), political parties have often included these legal minimum requirements in their own by-laws. Some parties have even gone beyond the legal requirements.<sup>6</sup> However, when contrasting legal quota systems with party quota systems, we reserve the concept of 'party quotas' for countries where quota provisions are introduced solely by the individual political parties and not required by national legal rules. The Nordic countries are one example of countries without legal quotas for public elections, only party quotas (Bergqvist 1999). It would be interesting to examine the differences that follow from these two quota systems, apart from the obvious one that legal quota systems apply to all political parties in a country, whereas party quotas are voluntary. A comparison between the Nordic case and Latin America reveals that legal quota systems do not automatically lead to higher representation for women than systems with only party quotas.

Table 1 shows interesting regional variations, or clusters. *Latin America* represents one such cluster, where, in the space of very few years (1996–8), many countries, with Argentina as front-runner in 1991, introduced quota systems, mostly legal quotas. Today, Latin American countries are at the core of the new global commitment to the fast track. Researchers have explained this amazing development, where totally male-dominated parliaments passed quota laws, by factors such as the difficult transition to democracy in the region and the desire of political leaders to present their countries as 'modern' by increasing women's representation (Marques-Pereira 2001; Htun and Jones 2002; Peschard 2003).

Quota regulations are also being adopted in several countries in *Asia*, and people there even talk about a new 'quota fever'. The radical move to introduce a 33 per cent quota in village councils in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh represents a very important step towards empowering women in countries



Table 1 Countries with constitutional quota and/or election law quota regulation for national parliaments<sup>a</sup>

	Quota type <sup>b</sup> (in constitution and/or in law)	Year of introduction	Present quota system (percentage)	Women in parliament (last election) (per cent)
<i>Americas</i>				
Argentina	C, L	1991, 1991	30	34.1 (2003)
Bolivia	L	1997	30	18.5 (2002)
Brazil	L	1997	30	8.2 (2002)
Costa Rica	L	1996	40	35.1 (2002)
Dominican Republic	L	1997	25	17.3 (2002)
Ecuador	L	1997	20	16.0 (2002)
Guyana	C	N/A	33	20.0 (2001)
Honduras	L	2000	30	5.5 (2001)
Mexico	L	2002	30	22.6 (2003)
Panama	L	1997	30	16.7 (2004)
Paraguay	L	1996	20	10.0 (2003)
Peru	L	1997	30	17.5 (2001)
<i>Europe</i>				
Belgium	L	1994	33	35.3 (2003)
Bosnia and Herzegovina	L	2001	33	16.7 (2002)
France	C, L	1999, 2000	50	12.1 (2002)
Macedonia	L	2002	30	17.5 (2002)
Serbia and Montenegro	L	2002	30	7.9 (2003)
<i>Africa and the Middle East</i>				
Djibouti	L	2002	10	10.8 (2003)
Eritrea	C	N/A	30	22.0 (1994)
Jordan	L	2003	6 seats	5.5 (2003)
Kenya	C	1997	6 seats	6.7 (2002)
Morocco	L	2002	30 seats	10.8 (2002)
Rwanda	C, L	2003	24 seats	48.8 (2003)
Sudan	L	N/A	10	9.7 (2000)
Tanzania	C, L	2000	20–30	22.3 (2000)
Uganda	C, L	1989	56 seats	24.7 (2001)
<i>Asia</i>				
Afghanistan	C	2004	25	25.0 (2004)
Armenia	L	1999	5	4.6 (2003)
Bangladesh	C	2004	45	2.0 (2001)
Indonesia	L	2003	30	8.8 (1999)
Korea, Democratic Rep	L	N/A	20	20.1 (2003)
Nepal	C, L	1990, 1990	5	5.9 (1999)

(continued)

Table 1 Continued

	Quota type <sup>b</sup> (in constitution and/or in law)	Year of introduction	Present quota system (percentage)	Women in parliament (last election) (per cent)
Pakistan	L	2002	60 seats	21.6 (2002)
Philippines	C, L	1995, 1995	20	17.8 (2001)
Taiwan	C	1997	10–25	22.2 (2001)

<sup>a</sup> Lower House or Single House. Moreover, Bolivia, Brazil, Peru, Greece, Serbia and Montenegro, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Bangladesh, China, India, Nepal, Pakistan, The Philippines and Taiwan have *constitutional* quotas for local and/or regional parliaments. See [www.quotaproject.org](http://www.quotaproject.org).

<sup>b</sup> C refers to quota provisions stipulated in the constitution, and L refers to quota provisions stipulated in law.

Source: [www.quotaproject.org](http://www.quotaproject.org) and national parliaments.

with massive female illiteracy and a strict patriarchal regime. While scholars evaluate this extraordinary experience in different ways, there seems to be general agreement that profound changes are taking place, but also that, without massive support and capacity-building, these new women politicians, of whom many are illiterate, tend to become tokens (Chowdhury 2002; Raman 2002; Mohanty 2003; Rai 2003; Sharma 2003).

A distinction should be made between *Western Europe* and *Eastern Europe*. In the former, there are few legal quota systems, France and Belgium being the exceptions. However, party quotas are becoming more and more widespread. In contrast, in the former communist countries in Eastern and Central Europe and Russia (with the exception of countries in former Yugoslavia), quotas are very unpopular, and with few exceptions not used. In some of the post-communist countries, e.g. Russia, quotas are actually being discussed, but resistance is fierce, also among women, because it reminds people of what is seen as the 'forced emancipation' of Soviet rule.

It is however a widespread myth that most communist countries had a stable 20 or 30 per cent quota specifically for women. But, unlike the myth of the long-time use of quotas in the Nordic countries, which influenced quota discourses in other parts of the world, the myth of 30 per cent quotas for women under communism has contributed negatively to current discussions on quotas in Eastern Europe and Russia.<sup>7</sup>

Several countries in *Africa* and *The Middle East* have introduced quotas. Uganda introduced a system of reserved seats for women as early as 1995. One of the most notable examples is South Africa, where the 30 per cent quota system of the ANC party brought the Republic of South Africa to the top of the world ranking of countries with high women's representation (Ballington 2002; Goetz and Hassim 2003). In late 2003, Rwanda topped the

world ranking, thus surpassing Sweden ([www.ipu.org](http://www.ipu.org)). In the 2003 election, twenty-four seats were reserved for women on women-only ballots, but another fifteen women were elected among the 'free seats', thus giving women thirty-nine out of eighty parliamentary seats, or 48.8 per cent. Women's representation in the *Arab* world is negligible, although quotas are currently being discussed there. Recently, by agreement among the political parties, Morocco elected thirty women on the 'national list', and in the June 2003 election in Jordan, six seats were reserved for women for the first time. In Egypt, quotas were in use only between 1979–86 (Abou-Zeid 1998).

Quotas for women are also being discussed in countries administered or occupied by the international community. In some cases, e.g. Bosnia and Herzegovina, the initiative came from international organizations in cooperation with local women's organizations (Jalusic and Antic 2001; Nordlund 2003). In the case of East Timor, however, the UN actually rejected a quota demand put forward by East Timor's women's organizations (Pires 2002). In both Afghanistan and Iraq, women's organizations have demanded quotas for women in the process of building new political institutions, and to some extent these demands seem to be being met (Dahlerup and Nordlund 2004; Nordlund 2004). This development makes it important to discuss further the concepts of empowerment 'from above' versus 'from below'.

Do quotas work? When comparing the percentage of women in Latin American countries covered by quota provisions with the international average percentage of women in parliament, there is only a small difference (17.3 per cent compared with 15.2 per cent). The intra-regional figure for countries with and without quotas is 17.3 and 11.1 per cent respectively. Thus, Table 2 shows that the use of quotas alone is not sufficient to ensure high levels of women in parliament. Moreover, a high level of representation could also be achieved without quotas.

Table 2 shows the top sixteen countries in the world, ranked according to the level of women's representation in national parliament. As can be seen, a majority of countries with more than 30 per cent women in the national parliament have implemented quota provisions.<sup>8</sup> Political party quotas for electoral candidates are the most frequent type of quota provision among countries with quotas. However, some countries at the top of the list, such as Denmark and Finland, have not implemented any type of quotas for national parliament.

Tables 1 and 2 show that the use of quotas alone is not sufficient to ensure high levels of representation for women. Properly implemented, however, quotas can bring about substantial improvements in women's political representation. Thus, a high representation of women may be attained by the implementation of various types of quotas, but it can also be achieved without them.

Table 1 revealed frequent discrepancies between the provision of quotas and the actual representation of women. This discrepancy between the quota requirement and the *de facto* election outcome should not just be regarded as a question of time, i.e. women's representation will reach the required

Table 2 Women in national parliament and quota provisions (parliaments with more than 30 per cent women in last election)

Country	Women in national parliament (per cent)	Type of quota provision <sup>a</sup> constitution/ law/party/no quotas	Electoral system <sup>b</sup>
Rwanda	48.8 (2003)	C, L	List-PR
Sweden	45.3 (2002)	P	List-PR
Denmark	38.0 (2005)	NQ	List-PR
Finland	37.5 (2003)	NQ	List-PR
Netherlands	36.7 (2003)	P	List-PR
Norway	36.4 (2001)	P	List-PR
Cuba	36.0 (2003)	NQ	NDE
Mozambique	36.0 (2004)	P	List-PR
Spain	36.0 (2004)	P	MMP
Belgium	35.3 (2003)	L	List-PR
Costa Rica	35.1 (2002)	L	List-PR
Argentina	34.1 (2003)	C, L	List-PR
Austria	33.9 (2002)	P	List-PR
Germany	32.8 (2002)	P	MMP
South Africa	32.8 (2004)	P	List-PR
Iceland	30.2 (2003)	P	List-PR

<sup>a</sup> Constitutional quotas (C), quotas by law (L), political party quotas only (P), no quotas (NQ).

<sup>b</sup> First past the post (FPTP), Proportional representation (List-PR), mixed member proportional (MMP), non-democratic elections (NDE).

Source: www.ipu.org; www.quotaproject.org and national parliaments.

percentage in due course. After all, the very aim of quota systems is to produce a rapid and immediate change, i.e. in the next election.<sup>9</sup>

The information about the electoral systems of the top sixteen countries (see Table 2) supports the well-known theory that electoral systems based on proportional representation are better at ensuring women's representation than the majority system (see also Rule 1987; Reynolds 1999). All the democratic countries listed in Table 2 use the proportional representation (PR) system, except for Germany. However, women's representation is considerably higher among those elected to the German Bundestag from the PR lists than from the majority constituencies.

The connection between electoral system and the introduction and efficiency of quota systems is interesting, but will not be discussed further in this article (see Matland and Studlar 1996). Quota provisions are undoubtedly more compatible with PR electoral systems than with majority systems, even though quota provisions are being tried out in several majority systems, such as the UK (party quotas in the form of short lists), France, India and Bangladesh as well as Nepal (legal quotas).

As Tables 1 and 2 show, quotas for women are also being used in parliaments resulting from non-democratic elections. It seems appropriate to use the term 'quotas as reserved seats' for systems that guarantee women a certain number of seats in parliament independent of the electoral result, whereas 'candidate quotas' (legal as well as party quotas) prescribe a certain percentage of women on the lists presented to voters at the election. In reality, the difference may in some cases be quite small, and many reserved-seat systems include some kind of election among the women candidates. In Uganda, an electoral college in each of the fifty-six districts elects a 'woman representative' to parliament. Seats are also reserved for other groups, e.g. youth, the armed forces and workers, and a few women are elected to so-called free seats. In all, women's representation in Uganda's parliament is as high as 24.7 per cent (Christensen 1999; Tripp 2000; [www.quotaproject.org](http://www.quotaproject.org)). The Jordanian quota system reserves 6 seats out of the 110 in the lower house for women. In the Jordanian debate this is called a 'quota system'. On the basis of the individual votes (compulsory preferential voting in a multi-member majority system), the six women who received the highest percentage of the total number of votes cast in their respective constituencies were elected to parliament – if they were not already elected by the ordinary procedure, which no women were.

## THE IMPLEMENTATION OF QUOTAS

In talking to legislators, feminist political activists, and the political analysts, this author found absolutely no evidence that any attention was paid to how quotas would actually work in conjunction with the very different rules that are used in municipal and congressional elections in Peru. Given the relatively high and unanticipated impact of gender quotas in Peru, perhaps this lack of attention to detail was a blessing in disguise.

(Smidt 2003: 3)

As a rule, there is more focus on the actual introduction of quota systems, while the complex process of implementing quotas is often neglected in the public debate. But while some countries have experienced dramatic increases following the adoption of gender quotas, others have witnessed more modest changes or even setbacks in the number of women parliamentarians. Even decision-makers tend to pay little attention to the implementation process that is meant to make quotas work. Passing quota regulations may be just a symbolic gesture if implementation is not regulated and there are no sanctions for non-compliance. Women's movements have an important role to play, not only when the quota rules are passed, but also throughout the whole implementation process.

Several factors are important to the successful implementation of quota provisions. Here, we will discuss two very crucial dimensions: first, the specification of the quota provisions, including the question of a rank order

for the candidates, and second, the sanctions for non-compliance and the eventual (non-)implementation of such sanctions. The following discussion is limited to candidate quotas.

### The Minimum Requirement

Candidate gender quotas imply that women must make up a certain minimum number or percentage of the candidate lists (Dahlerup 1998). Today, most quota systems aim at ensuring that women constitute at least a 'critical minority' of 20–30 per cent. As Table 1 shows, quota provisions vary considerably, from Nepal's 5 per cent to Costa Rica's 40 per cent and France's 50 per cent. A required minimum of 30 per cent women is most common. Among parties with quotas, some, like the green parties in many countries and the Swedish Social Democratic Party, demand an equal share of female and male candidates. In the new Italian debate on the introduction of quotas, the goal for supporters of quotas is not a minimum proportion but an equal share, as in the French debate on 'parité'.

### Gender Neutral or Quotas for Women?

Most quota systems aim at increasing women's representation, because the historical under-representation of women is seen as the inequality to be corrected. However, the rules are often formulated in a *gender-neutral* way. While gender neutrality may be a way to overcome resistance, some legislators or parties have not realized that there is a difference between gender-neutral and women-based quota systems.

A minimum requirement for women implies a maximum for the representation of men. In contrast, gender-neutral quotas involve a maximum for both sexes. An often-used rule is that neither gender should have more than 60 per cent and less than 40 per cent of the candidates. In many countries where women's organizations have demanded quotas for women, the actual law was written in gender-neutral terms. As long as women's representation remains low, gender-neutral framing has no consequences. But in, for instance, the Nordic countries, party quotas were deliberately designed to be gender-neutral, as are generally equal opportunity policies in these countries.

Gender-neutral quotas may thus also help men. In the Scandinavian left-wing parties, most of which changed from male-dominated to equality-oriented parties with many active women during the peak of the new Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s and 1980s, gender-neutral quotas have in some instances moved men up the ladder. In its first use of the party's new rules on gender-neutral quotas, the Danish Socialist People's Party moved a man up to number two on the electoral list after an internal primary had nominated four women for the top positions on the party's list

for the European Parliament in 1984. Since the party got only two seats in the election, this man and only one woman was subsequently elected (Dahlerup 1988a: 88).

In Sweden, the gender-neutral quota provision was introduced by some parties in the 1980s and early 1990s, when the more vague discourse on 'discrimination against women' had not yet given way to the more radical discourse on 'men's discrimination against women', directly blaming the homo-social recruitment pattern of male politicians (Freidenvall 2003).

The green parties were among the first to introduce gender quotas and to present gender-balanced lists for the elections. Many green parties also have one woman and one man as spokespersons. The German Greens, however, can also, and have actually had, two women leaders. Why have a maximum for women in an otherwise male-dominated society (Offe 2001)?

A 50–50 quota is by nature gender neutral. In the Swedish Social Democratic Party's so-called 'zipper system', the nomination committee suggests two lists of candidates, one for women and another for men. These two lists are then combined like a zipper, and the only thing left to decide is whether the combined list should be topped from the top of the women's list or the men's. *In 50–50 per cent quota systems, the question of stigmatization of the elected women ('elected just because you are a woman') is not relevant, since both men and women are there as a result of the quota.* Seen in relation to the discussion of women as a group, the 50–50 system no doubt constructs women and men as two separate categories in the nomination process. However, the discussion of categorization seems to be more heated in systems with lower quota requirements, especially in the introduction phase (Freidenvall forthcoming).

#### Rules on the Ranking of Candidates

A requirement of 30 per cent women on the list may result in no women being elected at all. But even a radical 50–50 regulation, where women and men are alternated on the list, can, under special circumstances, result in the election of only men from the party in question. If, for example, a small party nominates a man as first on the list and a woman as second in a closed-list electoral system, and the party wins none or only one seat in all constituencies, then a 50–50 quota provision is of no help. In this case, as in majority systems, the central party has to intervene in order to break the tradition, which counteracts the tradition of local party autonomy in nominations.

The women's movements in Latin America quickly formulated new demands and got them passed when the first quota regulations failed in most cases to fulfil the 20 or 30 per cent requirement, both on the lists and among the elected (Marques-Pereira 2001; Peschard 2003). In countries such as Argentina, Paraguay, Bolivia and Ecuador, rules were eventually passed on the ranking of candidates on the electoral list, the so-called 'placement mandates' or 'double

quotas'. In Argentina, the quota pioneer among Latin American countries, the decree of 1993 fixes the minimum number of seats guaranteed to women: at least one when two–four are available; two when five–eight are available, etc.

In Costa Rica in 1999, after intervention from women's organizations, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal came up with the following radical interpretation of the quota law: women should not only have the required 40 per cent of the candidates on the lists, but also 40 per cent of the 'electable' seats, interpreted as the number of seats that the party won in the constituency in the previous election. There are ongoing discussions about how to interpret this ruling for new parties (Peschard 2003; Quesada 2003).

In the case of Peru, a 25 per cent quota was introduced in 1997, to be raised to 30 per cent in 2001. In 1997, women constituted only 11 per cent of Congress, today the figure is 18 per cent. Women's organizations have pushed hard to make the National Board of Elections actually implement the rules. A complaint for non-compliance has been filed with the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights ([www.quotaproject.org](http://www.quotaproject.org)).

### Sanctions for Non-Compliance

The distinction between legal quotas and party quotas becomes highly relevant in the case of sanctions for non-compliance. In party quota systems, the sanctions are only political – critique from women's groups within the party or reactions from the voters. In contrast, legal quota systems often have some rules about sanctions in case of non-compliance. However, our global overview shows a vast range of sanctions, from none whatsoever to the most efficient – the duty (and not just discretionary right) of the electoral commission to reject lists that do not comply with the required quota provisions. It is important to note, however, that while regulated sanctions are important, there is no guarantee that they will be used, as in Peru and Brazil. In France, the rejection of lists which failed to meet the requirement worked, and women's representation on municipal councils in larger cities doubled. At the national level, only financial sanctions were available, which obviously did not deter the parties, and consequently women's representation increased only marginally, from 10.9 to 12.3 per cent in the French National Assembly – a disappointment after the extensive public debate on 'parité' (Sineau 2002). More international comparisons are needed about the effectiveness of different types of sanctions in various political systems (see Dahlerup forthcoming).

The conclusion is that the specification of the electoral gender quota systems is of the utmost importance and that their efficiency in terms of increasing the number of women elected depends on how the specific rules match the electoral system of the country in question. Quota provisions that do not match the electoral system may just be symbolic. Furthermore, in the case of legal quotas, sanctions for non-compliance are crucial, provided that the sanctions



themselves are implemented, e.g. the rejection by electoral authorities of those electoral lists which do not live up to the required number of women. By considering international comparative data on the introduction and impact of gender targets or gender quotas, we argue that it is of utmost importance to locate strategies for increasing representation in the context of specific national circumstances, reflecting the importance of political institutions, electoral systems and cultural dynamics. Since most quota systems were only introduced recently, further comparative research into the rules and processes of quota implementation is needed in the future.

## QUOTAS AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

The Scandinavian notion that the introduction of quota systems is very difficult, if not impossible, if women do not already have a solid power base in parliament or in the political party in question, is contradicted by the rapid diffusion of quota measures worldwide, particularly during the 1990s. Today, quotas have been introduced in countries where women's representation is low, and where women seemingly had little political influence. Gender quotas therefore appear in countries at all levels of development and in various social and economic political systems. This implies that we see systems of heavy male-dominance giving way to women.

We have argued elsewhere that one of the most important factors behind this new trend is the influence from a new international discourse supporting active measures to increase women's representation, as, for example, at the UN conference in Beijing in 1995. However, this does not explain why quotas are being introduced in some countries and not others, and why quota systems seem to expand in clusters, as shown in Table 1. Consequently, the focus should be on the study of the *translation* of these new international and regional discourses through national actors, e.g. the women's movement. This translation approach is a further development of theories of contagion and diffusion (Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2003; see also Krook 2004).

**The crucial question to be discussed in the last part of this article is the extent to which, and under what circumstances, quotas will eventually empower women, which is after all the ultimate goal for most advocates of such measures.**

**In quantitative terms, quotas have proven effective at increasing the number of women in political assemblies, provided that the specific rules match the electoral system in question, and provided that sanctions for non-compliance exist and are properly enforced. Without these prerequisites, quota rules may be only symbolic and cause widespread disappointment.**

Quotas are thus a means to open up systems of closed and male-dominated recruitment patterns. Quota systems do not accept the argument that there are not enough (competent) women, but demand that parties seriously begin to search for women and allow women at all levels in the party organization. In this way, quotas target the very heart of the recruitment process.

However, quota systems do not remove all barriers to women in politics, such as women's double burden, the gender imbalance of campaign financing, the many obstacles women meet when performing their job as elected politicians, and quotas may even contribute to the stigmatization of women politicians. But quota provisions, properly implemented, do obstruct and overcome some of the most crucial barriers to women's equal political representation, such as male succession patterns, women's lack of power in the parties, especially in the nomination processes, and invalidate the common argument that the party could not find enough women to stand for election. *Instead, quota systems force parties to scrutinize and change their male-dominated gender profile and seriously start recruiting women who share their political conviction.*

Historical jumps in women's representation can be achieved by many other means besides quotas (e.g. through forming a women's party like in Iceland or, through heavy pressure from the women's movement on the parties like in Scandinavia in the 1970s), and reversely quotas do not always result in increased women's representation. Indeed, as already mentioned, they may even have unintended consequences. However, properly implemented and backed by an active women's movement, electoral gender quotas do represent one of the most efficient measures for increasing women's representation in political institutions.

An evaluation of quota regulations in *qualitative* terms should be the subject of future research the world over. Among important themes are the possibilities for elected women to perform their job, changes in political culture, changes of public policy (substantial representation of women versus numerical representation), the interaction between the women's movement and elected women and the alliance structure within political assemblies.

We suggest that the two tracks may have different implications for women's empowerment, seen within a limited time perspective: The *incremental track* to high representation usually ensures that elected women have some power base outside parliament, whether in terms of educational or job resources, or by their positions in political parties, trade unions or other organizations. While the *fast track* does have its advantages because of the speed of the changes, it can also create problems. The fast track, where women are given political positions 'from above', so to speak, could turn them into tokens and leave them relatively powerless, unless the initiative is followed up by massive capacity-building, critique and support of the many newcomers by women's organizations. This is, of course, evident in the cases of the 33 per cent quotas for local councils in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India, which resulted in the election of tens of thousands of non-educated women. But in no country does the fast track quota automatically lead to the empowerment of women.

What is crucial is how elected women use their new political power, what *critical acts* they perform in order to mobilize the resources of the political systems to improve the situation for themselves and for women in society in general (Dahlerup 1988b: 296). Feminist research has shown that women

in politics do make a difference, but also that women politicians to a large extent adapt to the existing norms of the political institutions. It may be that the incremental track, with its small increase in the number of women from one election to another, increases the mechanisms of adaptation and assimilation, whereas large increases in the number of women in parliament, a 'gender shock', increases the opportunities for women to change the rules and content of politics. Only future research into the results of fast tracks will show whether this hypothesis holds.

Women's impatience is growing worldwide. Women's movements all over the world demand gender-balanced political institutions now. We therefore argue that the gradualist Scandinavian strategy can no longer be considered the model for women's political empowerment around the world, even if the goal of 50 per cent women in all political assemblies is shared by all. Impatience is also growing in some of the Nordic countries today, and the fast track discourse is heard, especially in Swedish and Norwegian centre and left parties today.

A frequently expressed wish in quota discourses is that some day quotas will no longer be necessary, and equal representation will come 'by itself'. No political system seems to have reached that point, however.

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## Notes

- 1 Oral communication from Mariá José Lubertino, president of the Instituto Social y Política de la Mujer. Professor of Human Rights and Guarantees at the Universidad de Buenos Aires. See also Phillips (1995: 57).
- 2 In *Denmark*, three parties on the left introduced quotas in the mid-1980s and abandoned them again in the mid-1990s. The large Social Democratic Party has never had quotas for national parliament election, only for local and European elections (1988–96). Today, no political party in Denmark has formal electoral quotas. In *Norway*, electoral gender quotas were also introduced by parties on the left (from 1975, by the Left Socialist Party, from 1983, by the Labour Party), to be followed by all other parties except the Conservatives and the right-wing Progress Party. In Norway today, quotas have become an institutional norm, also in other areas of public life. In *Sweden*, electoral quotas were first introduced by the Green Party (1987) and the Left Party (1987). It was not until 1993 that Sweden's largest party, the Social Democrats, introduced their 'zipper system', where women and men alternate on the electoral ballot. An unprecedented decrease from 38 to 33 per cent in the 1991 election contributed to a renewed discussion

of women's political representation in Sweden and to the formation of the feminist pressure group, the 'Support Stockings', who threatened to form a pure women's party, as in Iceland. The bourgeois parties in Sweden have tended to prefer non-mandatory 'recommendation' in order to increase the number of women on party lists for public election. A large variety of intra-party and cross-party strategies have been used to further women's political representation in the Scandinavian countries. However, the increase in women's representation in parliament in the three countries has always been gradual, usually a couple of percentage points per election. Increases in any one election have never exceeded 8–9 per cent points, and such increases have occurred both before and after the introduction of quotas. Legal quotas for public elections were never introduced in Denmark, Norway or Sweden, nor in Iceland and Finland (Dahlerup 1988a, 1988b; Sainsbury 1993; Bergqvist 1999; Freidenvall forthcoming).

- 3 In a forthcoming book (Dahlerup forthcoming), the quota systems in all major regions in the world are compared.
- 4 This website, representing the first global overview of electoral gender quotas ([www.quotaproject.org](http://www.quotaproject.org)), is the result of a joint venture between International IDEA and our research project, entitled 'Quotas – a Key to Equality? An International Comparison of the Use of Electoral Quotas to Obtain Equal Political Citizenship for Women' ([www.statsvet.su.se/quotas](http://www.statsvet.su.se/quotas)). We would like to thank everybody who participated in the hard work of collecting data for this website: Julie Ballington and Virginia Beramendi-Heine at IDEA, Christina Alnevall and Anja Taarup Nordlund at our department and Mona Lena Krook at Columbia University. This global overview would not have been possible without the help of a large number of researchers and women's organizations from all over the world.
- 5 Quotas for internal party structures are not discussed here, nor are quota provisions for public committees and boards.
- 6 In Belgium, for instance, a law of 2002 lays down a 33 per cent quota, but some parties have an even higher requirement. Here, there seems to be an interesting interaction between party quotas and legal quotas, which, it should be remembered, are passed by the very same parties, acting as legislators in parliament (Meier 2004).
- 7 Under communism, women's representation in the powerful Central Committees of the Communist Parties was negligible, but somewhat higher in the mostly symbolic parliaments. A few figures may contradict the myth of a stable quota provision for women of 30 per cent. In the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party, women's representation (full members) was 8 per cent in 1981, increasing only to 13 per cent in 1986, an historical high (Browning 1987: 34). Women had 31 per cent of the seats in the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, and as many as 48 per cent in the local Soviets in 1975 (Lapidus 1978: 205). Women's representation in the parliaments in many Eastern European countries increased during the 1970s and 1980s, but the system of selection or appointment varied from country to country (Wolchik and Meyer 1985; Matland and Montgomery 2003).
- 8 In the 2003 election, 50 per cent women and men were elected to the Welsh parliament. However, being a part of the United Kingdom and not an independent state, Wales is not included in Table 2.

- 9 In some countries, like Belgium and Brazil, a gradual increase in the minimum requirement was built into the law.

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