

# REPRESENT WOMEN



## Why Rules and Systems Matter: *Lessons from Around the World*

December 2018

**About RepresentWomen:** RepresentWomen is a nonpartisan organization working to strengthen our democracy by advancing reforms that break down barriers to ensure more women can run, win, serve, and lead.

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A note on the data presented: Thank you to the Inter - Parliamentary Union (IPU), the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA). This report would not have been possible without their data. Please see our methodology for more information.

Cover photo source: Tom Grimbert via Unsplash

## Letter from the Executive Director

In April of 1776, John Adams wrote that the United States House of Representatives “*should be in miniature, an exact portrait of the people at large. It should think, feel, reason, and act like them.*” Two hundred and forty two years later, the U.S. House falls well short of Adams’ vision of representative democracy in America. Despite a record number of well-qualified female candidates in 2018 and a frenzy of news coverage, women will comprise just 23% of House members in the 116th Congress.

Twenty years ago the United States ranked 60th among nations for women’s representation. Today, after the much-heralded ‘year of the woman,’ the U.S. ranks 77th. Why does the U.S. rank further behind the rest of the world for gender balance than it did in 1998? One might wonder if the women in higher ranked nations are somehow different but a quick survey of the political landscape in nations from Bolivia to Norway to Mozambique provides a clear answer. The nations that are electing more women to office - at a faster rate - have adopted rules and systems that create more opportunities for women to run and win.

While the rankings of nations will shift over time, recruitment practices and voting systems will continue to have a profound impact on electoral outcomes for women candidates. The goal of this report is to spark a vibrant conversation about data-driven strategies to increase women’s representation at all levels of government in the United States.

I am very grateful to the team of RepresentWomen staff and interns who have worked with great care to maintain our database on [international women’s representation](#) and analyze the correlation among gender quotas, voting systems, and women’s representation.

A handful of nations have achieved gender parity while many more have made great strides toward gender balance in recent decades. This report confirms that innovative systems strategies - used the world over - are essential to realize the promise of representative democracy sought by so many generations of Americans.

**Cynthia Richie Terrell**

RepresentWomen, Executive Director and Founder

December 2018

## Introduction

### *Women's representation worldwide: Where does the U.S. stand?*

Women won a record number of races in the November 2018 midterm elections and now hold 102 seats in the United States House of Representatives. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, which tracks numbers of women in office internationally, the U.S. now ranks 77th among nations for women's representation; in 1998 the U.S. ranked 60th. The U.S. ranks further behind the rest of the world than it did 20 years ago - even with significant gains for women - because other nations have adopted recruitment practices and voting systems that create more opportunities for women to run, win, serve, and lead.

### *Barriers for women candidates*

Female candidates face an uphill battle under the U.S. political system. Barriers hold women back from running and winning in equal numbers to their male counterparts. For example, political parties recruit fewer female candidates to run in winnable districts, and political action committees (PACs), which play a significant role in U.S. elections, give less funding to women candidates, especially Republican women.<sup>1</sup> Female candidates are also disadvantaged by the single-winner district, pluralitywinner-take-all electoral system that protects incumbents and fortifies the status quo. In addition, the antiquated voting system used for most elections in the U.S. fuels a high cost of running for office, and drives negative campaigning which discourages women from running. The current political system perpetuates an uneven playing field for female candidates and leads to a government that is not reflective of the population.

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1. Individual and PAC Giving to Women Candidates. RepresentWomen. November 2016. [https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/fairvote/pages/4542/attachments/original/1480388175/Giving\\_to\\_Female\\_Candidates\\_November\\_14\\_final\\_draft.pdf?1480388175](https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/fairvote/pages/4542/attachments/original/1480388175/Giving_to_Female_Candidates_November_14_final_draft.pdf?1480388175)

## *Rules and Systems Matter: Global Lessons*

Progress toward gender parity in elected office in the United States has been slow, especially in comparison to other nations. Most of the 76 countries that rank above the United States for women's political representation have adopted recruitment rules and voting systems that level the playing field for women candidates. It's clear from these examples that reaching gender parity in elected and appointed office will take intentional action and policy reform.

This report explores how rules and systems, particularly gender quotas and proportional representation systems, have helped nations around the world sustain progress toward gender parity in elected office. Understanding the impact of systems on representation in government is essential to designing strategies that address institutional barriers. The conclusion includes a proposal with tangible, data-driven solutions based on lessons learned from other nations that can move the United States toward reaching gender parity in government - in our lifetime.

## Methodology

Our research shows that rules and systems play important roles for determining representation in government. In order to assess the present status of women’s representation around the world, we designed a database to rank the proportion of women represented in the lower (or singular) houses of parliaments across 193 countries (as of November 2018). We then compared each country according to the following criteria:

- (1) The electoral system used to select these representatives and
- (2) Whether gender quotas had been implemented (and what type(s) of quotas, if so).

The following report provides our findings and an analysis of the data we assembled.

This research would not have been possible without referring to the Inter-Parliamentary Union’s New Parline,<sup>2</sup> an open data platform on national parliaments, from which we were able to track up-to-date figures on the number of women who are members of parliament in each assembly and how they rank on a global scale. The IFES Election Guide was also essential, as it provides the most recently verified election information available as it is released.<sup>3</sup> Credit is also owed to the International IDEA, whose chapter on Electoral Design in the Global Database on Elections and Democracy (June 2005)<sup>4</sup> was crucial to our understanding of electoral systems around the world. Together with Stockholm University research affiliates, the IPU and International IDEA also created the Gender Quota Database (March 2003),<sup>5</sup> from which we derived a baseline for what kinds of quotas had been implemented around the world.

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2. *New Parline: the IPU’s Open Data Platform (beta)*. Inter-Parliamentary Union. 2018. <https://data.ipu.org/>

3. IFES F. Clifton White Applied Research Center on democracy and Elections. Election Guide. International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES). 1998. Updated 2018. <http://www.electionguide.org/elections/?inst=Lower+House&cont=&yr=2018>

4. Andrew Reynolds, Ben Reilly, Andrew Ellis. “Electoral System Design.” *The New International IDEA Handbook*. International IDEA. June 2005. <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/electoral-system-design-new-international-idea-handbook>

5. International IDEA, Inter-Parliamentary Union, Stockholm University. *Gender Quotas Database*. March 2003. <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas/about#methods>

## *Addendum*

In this analysis, we focus on the three main electoral systems (majoritarian, proportional representation, and mixed); there are additional types of electoral systems used around the world, but due to their small sample size, these are not discussed in our report.

Also note that the data used in this report reflects the election results for women in their lower (or singular) houses of parliaments around the world as of November 2018. There are a few cases in which the election results are still pending release or are otherwise unavailable; we used the most up-to-date figures for our analysis, but the interested reader will find these cases marked in the database we are publishing alongside this report. In this database, we have also made note of the dates each count of women in parliament was made to account for future elections and circumstances that will lead to changes in the rankings.

With these future changes in mind, we would like to invite researchers and other area experts to contribute to future editions of this research and reach out to us if they notice that the database has missing data, or could be improved upon in any way.

## Rules and Systems

### Electoral Systems

#### *Different Countries, Different Electoral Systems*

*“Nearly every national legislature in the world underrepresents women compared to their proportion in the voting population, but the extent to which they are underrepresented...varies remarkably.”*

- Sona Golder, 2017 <sup>6</sup>

There are many different rules and procedures that countries use to govern their elections. Explanations for this variation often rely on the cultural or socioeconomic conditions native to each country. But most countries, in addition to having unique cultures and histories, also have electoral systems that are different from those used in the United States. As such, the degree to which women are represented across countries varies according to the complex combination of structural and environmental factors.

**Electoral Systems** are defined by the rules and procedures that govern how power is distributed among political parties and candidates after an election.

Source: Tracy Ann Johnson-Myers, 2017 <sup>7</sup>

The differences between electoral systems are important because they tend to impact the degree to which women are represented across different systems of government. How votes translate into seats is very important for determining who gains power and how power is shared after an election.

6. Golder, Sona et al. “Votes for Women: Electoral Systems and Support for Female Candidates.” *Politics & Gender*. 2017. P 108. Doi: 10.1017/S1743923X16000684

7. “Johnson-Myers, Tracy Ann. “The Impact of Electoral Systems on Women’s Political Representation.” *The Mixed Member Proportional System: Providing Greater Representation for Women? The University of the West Indies at Mona*. 2017. p 9. Doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-44314-0\_2

*“Electoral systems represent perhaps the most powerful instrument available for institutional engineering, with far-reaching consequences for party systems, the composition of legislatures, and the durability of democratic arrangements.”*

- Pippa Norris, 2004<sup>8</sup>

**There are three main types of election systems:**

1. **Majoritarian/Plurality** - a system in which the candidate with the most votes wins; also known as ‘winner-take-all’ or ‘first-past-the-post’

2. **Proportional Representation (PR)** - a system in which seats are allocated according to the share of the vote each candidate or party receives

**Closed List Proportional Representation:** the party fixes the order candidates are listed on a ballot

**Open List Proportional Representation:** voters are presented with unordered lists of candidates and votes for individual candidates indirectly count as party votes; the most popular candidates rise to the top of the list and have a better chance of being elected

3. **Mixed** - a system which combines majoritarian and proportional representation voting

Source: *Electoral System Design: The New International IDEA Handbook. 2005.*<sup>9</sup>

*Note: though winner-take-all, single-winner district pluralities are the norm in the U.S. nationally, a number of jurisdictions (including the state of Maine) have adopted ranked choice voting for single and/or multi-winner elections.*

8. Norris, Pippa. “Chapter 9: Ethnic Minorities.” *Electoral Engineering: Voting Rules and Political Behaviour*. Cambridge University Press. P 209.

9. Andrew Reynolds, Ben Reilly, Andrew Ellis. “Electoral System Design.” *The New International IDEA Handbook*. International IDEA. June 2005. <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/electoral-system-design-new-international-idea-handbook>

## *Why some election systems allow for a more representative democracy*

In general, proportional representation (PR) systems are associated with greater representation for women than majoritarian systems, though previous studies on this topic have produced mixed results.<sup>10</sup> According to Tracy-Ann Johnson-Myers (2017), proportional representation systems enable more women to be represented because parties are encouraged to create balanced party lists from which voters can select from a pool of candidates reflecting the interests and social-demographic makeup of the society at large.<sup>11</sup> By this reasoning, electoral systems that appeal to a spectrum of voters' interests present more opportunities for minorities and other underrepresented constituencies to be represented in their legislative bodies.

“

*The basic idea behind the PR electoral system is that it will better reflect opinions and interests of the electorate, and thus makes for fairer and broader representation, which will then result in responsiveness, legitimacy and order.*

”

- Tracey-Ann Johnson-Myers, 2017<sup>12</sup>

Though it is true that nearly every legislature underrepresents women, countries using a closed list proportional representation or mixed system boast some of the highest numbers of women in their lower or singular houses of parliament in the world.

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10. Golder, Sona et al. "Votes for Women: Electoral Systems and Support for Female Candidates." *Politics & Gender*. 2017. P 108. Doi: 10.1017/S1743923X16000684

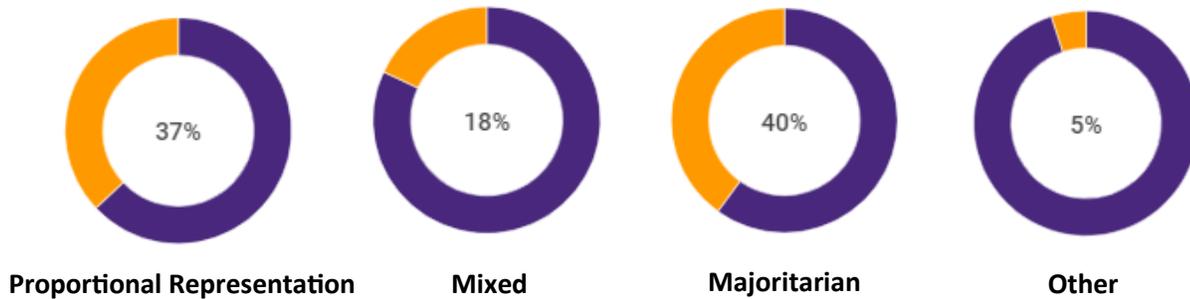
11. Johnson-Myers, Tracy-Ann. "The Impact of Electoral Systems on Women's Political Representation." *The Mixed Member Proportional System: Providing Greater Representation for Women? The University of the West Indies at Mona*. 2017. p 9. Doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-44314-0\_2

12. Ibid. p 10.

***Our Findings: Electoral Systems***

Based on the data collected on electoral systems used internationally, RepresentWomen finds the following:

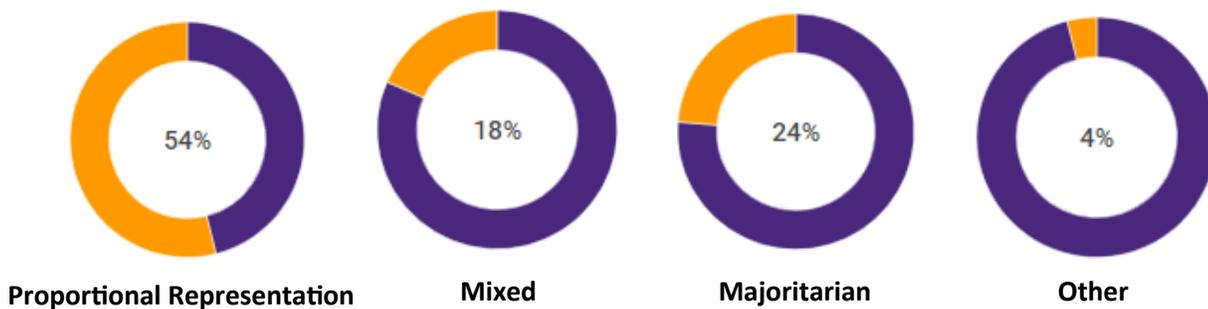
**1. More than half the world uses a proportional representation system or mixed system.**



**Figure 1. Percentages of proportional representation, majoritarian, mixed and other**

As displayed in the series of graphs above (Figure 1), approximately 40% of countries worldwide have majoritarian systems, 37% have proportional representation systems, 18% have mixed systems, and 5% have other types of electoral systems. As a whole, more than 55% of nations use a proportional representation or mixed system.

**2. Most of the countries that rank above the United States in women’s representation in government use a proportional representation or mixed system.**



**Figure 2. Percentages of proportional representation, majoritarian, mixed and other ranked above US**

Of the countries that rank above the U.S. for women’s political representation, approximately 54% have a proportional representation system and 18% have a mixed electoral system. In other words, 72% of the countries that rank above the U.S. in women’s representation have a proportional representation or mixed electoral system.

**3. The majority of countries that rank in the top 50 for women’s political representation have a proportional representation or mixed electoral system.**

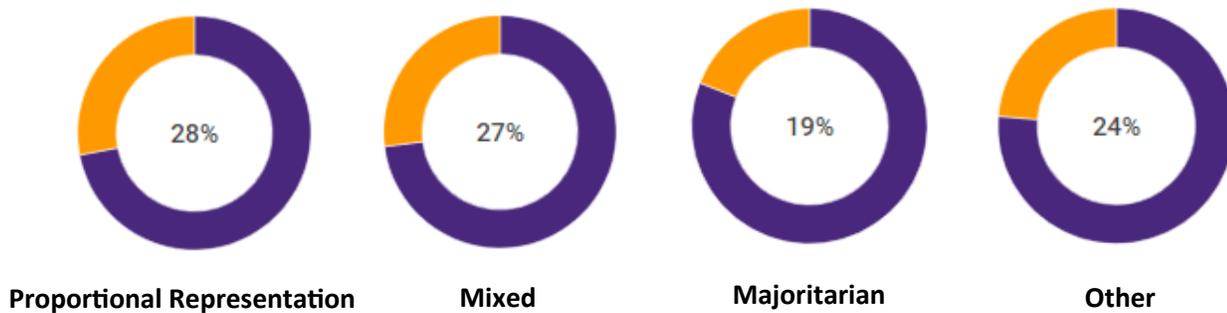
*Top 50 and Top 10*

Of the countries that rank in the top 50 for women’s political representation, 52% have a proportional representation system and 26% have a mixed electoral system. This means that nearly three-quarters of countries in the top 50 have a proportional representation or mixed electoral system, as displayed in Figure 3 below. Of the top 10 ranking countries in the world, 60% have a proportional representation system and 20% have mixed electoral systems. As a whole, 80% of countries in the top 10 use a proportional representation or mixed system.



**Figure 3. Percentage of countries (top 50, top 10) with proportional representation or mixed electoral systems**

**4. On average, countries with proportional and mixed system tend to have better women’s representation.**



**Figure 4. Women’s Representation in proportional representation, majoritarian, mixed and other**

As displayed in the figure above, on average, countries with proportional representation have approximately 28% of women represented in the lower houses compared to those with majoritarian systems, which have just 19%. Mixed systems have an average of 27% women in the lower house. Those with “other” types of electoral systems have 24%.

Countries with proportional representation or a mixed system tend to, on average, have higher percentages of women in their parliaments. The need to appeal to a wide variety of voters in order to win seats encourages political parties under a proportional representation system to construct gender-balanced party lists, which leads to higher women’s representation.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, countries with a mixed system, which shares some features with PR systems, have higher women’s representation too.

***Proportional Representation in the United States***

Although the United States may not be changing to the widely used version of proportional representation, there are forms of fair representation voting that create similar results. Ranked choice voting in multi-winner districts - used in Ireland, Australia, and Malta - is a form of proportional representation that is gaining traction in the U.S. as evidenced by a [lead editorial](#) in *The New York Times* in June of 2018.<sup>14</sup>

13. Johnson-Myers, Tracy Ann. “The Impact of Electoral Systems on Women’s Political Representation.” *The Mixed Member Proportional System: Providing Greater Representation for Women?*

14. Editorial Board. “A Congress for Every American.” *The New York Times*. June 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/11/10/opinion/house-representatives-size-multi-member.html>

## Quotas

### *What are quotas and why are they important?*

Over the past decade, more women around the world have been elected to office than ever before. This unprecedented trend has been fueled by the widespread adoption of gender quotas. Today, 121 out of 193 use some form of gender quotas in their national elections.

**Gender Quotas** are affirmative electoral thresholds which ensure that a predetermined composition (number or percentage) of candidates or representatives for a legislative assembly are women.<sup>15</sup>

Quotas are proven mechanisms for change as they have successfully accelerated the rate at which women achieve political representation in all regions of the world. Though definition and implementation varies from country to country, some form of gender quota now exists in over half the countries of the world, with the majority appearing over the last two decades.<sup>16</sup>

*“More often than not, voluntary or compulsory gender quotas have become the preferred answer to women’s long-lasting underrepresentation in many spheres of social, economic, and political life, providing an apparently simple and efficient solution to the complex problem of women’s exclusion from active and full citizenship”*

- Éléonore Lépinard and Ruth Rubio-Marín, 2018<sup>17</sup>

15. See report glossary on pgs. 24– 26.

16. Franceschet, Susan, Mona Lena Krook, and Jennifer M. Piscopo. *The Impact of Gender Quotas*. Oxford Scholarship Online. 2012. Doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199830091.001.0001

17. Lépinard, Éléonore and Ruth Rubio-Marín. “Completing the Unfinished Task? Gender Quotas and the Ongoing Struggle for Women’s Empowerment in Europe.” *Transforming Gender Citizenship: The Irresistible Rise of Gender Quotas in Europe*. Cambridge University Press. 2018. P1.

**There are three main types of quotas:**

1. **Reserved Seat Quotas** - a system in which the gender composition of a legislative body is regulated by law to designate a certain number or percentage of seats for women
  
2. **Legislated Candidate Quotas** - a system in which the target composition of women on candidate lists is set by political parties. These quotas are mandated either through national constitutions or by electoral legislation. The contents of these candidate lists may be further regulated via **Placement Mandates**, or rules about the rank order of candidates on electoral lists designed to prevent political parties from creating further disadvantages for women who run, ie:
  - Double Quotas** - a system in which the women on candidate lists are not permitted to be solely placed at the bottom of these lists (in which case the odds of their election would be slim)
  - Zipper System** - a system in which candidates on party lists are ordered in an alternating pattern between men and women
  
3. **Party Quotas** - voluntary commitments made by political parties to field or nominate a pre-determined number or percentage of women candidates

Source: Gender Quota Database 2009<sup>18</sup> and Atlas of Electoral Gender Quotas 2014<sup>19</sup>

*Note: quotas have also been used to increase the representation of minorities based on regional, ethnic, racial, linguistic, socioeconomic, and religious differences. This report focuses on quotas as they pertain to gender.*

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18. Drude Dahlerup, *Gender Quotas Database*, International IDEA, 2009, <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas/quotas>

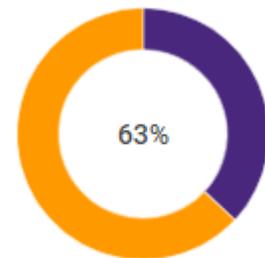
19. Drude Dahlerup, Zeina Hilal, Nana Kalandadze, and Rumbidzai Kandawasvika-Nhundu, *Atlas of Electoral Gender Quotas*, Inter-Parliamentary Union, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, and Stockholm University. 20 June 2014. <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/atlas-electoral-gender-quotas?lang=en>

## *Our Findings: Electoral Systems*

Based on the data collected on quotas used internationally, RepresentWomen found the following:

### **1. Most countries have some form of gender quotas.**

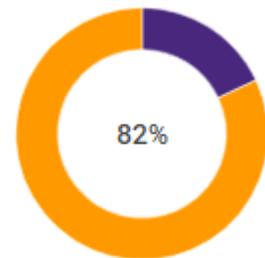
One hundred and twenty-one of the 193 countries in our data set have one or more forms of gender quotas in place. Among these 121 countries, 44 have only legislated candidate quotas, 38 have only party quotas, 13 have both legislated candidate quotas and party quotas, and 26 have reserved seats.



**Figure 5. Percentage of countries with a gender quota**

### **2. Of the countries that rank above the United States for women’s political representation, over three quarters have some form of gender quota.**

Seventy-six countries rank above the United States for women’s political representation, 62 of which have one or more gender quotas in place.

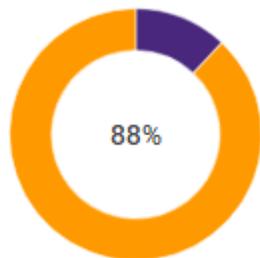


**Figure 6. Percentage of countries ranked above the US with a gender quota**

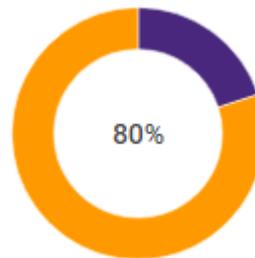
**3. The majority of countries that rank in the top 50 for women’s political representation have some form of gender quota.**

*Top 50 and Top 10*

Of the countries that rank in the top 50 for women’s political representation, 88% have one or more forms of a gender quota in place while 80% of countries in the top 10 have some form of quota in place.



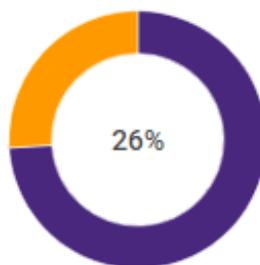
**Figure 7. Percentage of countries in the top 50 with a gender quota**



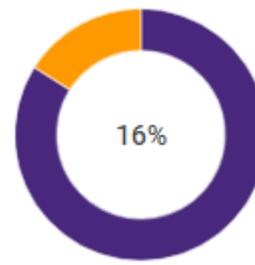
**Figure 8. Percentage of countries in the top 10 with a gender quota**

**4. As a whole, countries with gender quotas have a higher percentage of women in the lower house.**

On average, in countries with a gender quota rule, women comprise approximately 26% of the lower house, whereas in the nations without a gender quota rule, women comprise 16% of the lower house. There are examples of countries that have quotas, but low women’s representation as a result of poor quota enforcement.



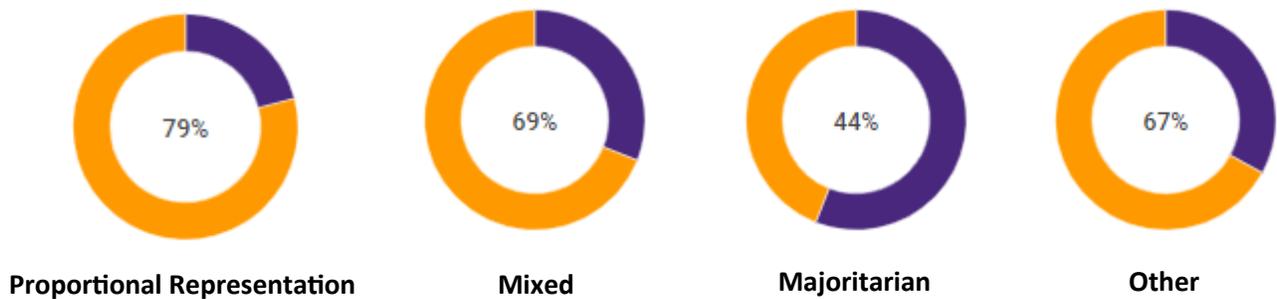
**With Gender Quotas**



**Without Gender Quotas**

**Figure 9. Average women’s representation in the lower house**

**5. There is a high correlation between proportional representation and some form of gender quota.**



**Figure 10. Percentage of countries with a gender quota per election system**

A gender quota is one of the most efficient ways to secure a gender-balanced party list. Proportional representation systems encourage political parties to create more gender-balanced party lists, often through a quota. This pattern is showcased in the pie charts (Figure 10) above.

Note: Due to high correlation between proportional representation and gender quota systems, the impact of electoral systems on women’s representation can be difficult to distinguished from that of gender quotas. We encourage more research on this topic.

## 6. Gender quotas have a consistent positive impact.

As displayed in the graph below (Figure 11), gender quotas have consistently positive impacts across electoral systems. Based on the data, quotas have a positive impact on women’s political representation, regardless of the electoral system. On average, women’s representation in proportional systems with quotas was 10% higher than proportional systems without quotas. The same applies to mixed electoral systems which saw a 16% increase in women’s representation with a quota. In comparison, majoritarian systems only saw a 5% increase in women’s representation with quotas. It is important to note that the effectiveness of a gender quota can vary based on differences across electoral systems, the magnitude of gender quotas, the degree of quota enforcement and social gender norms.

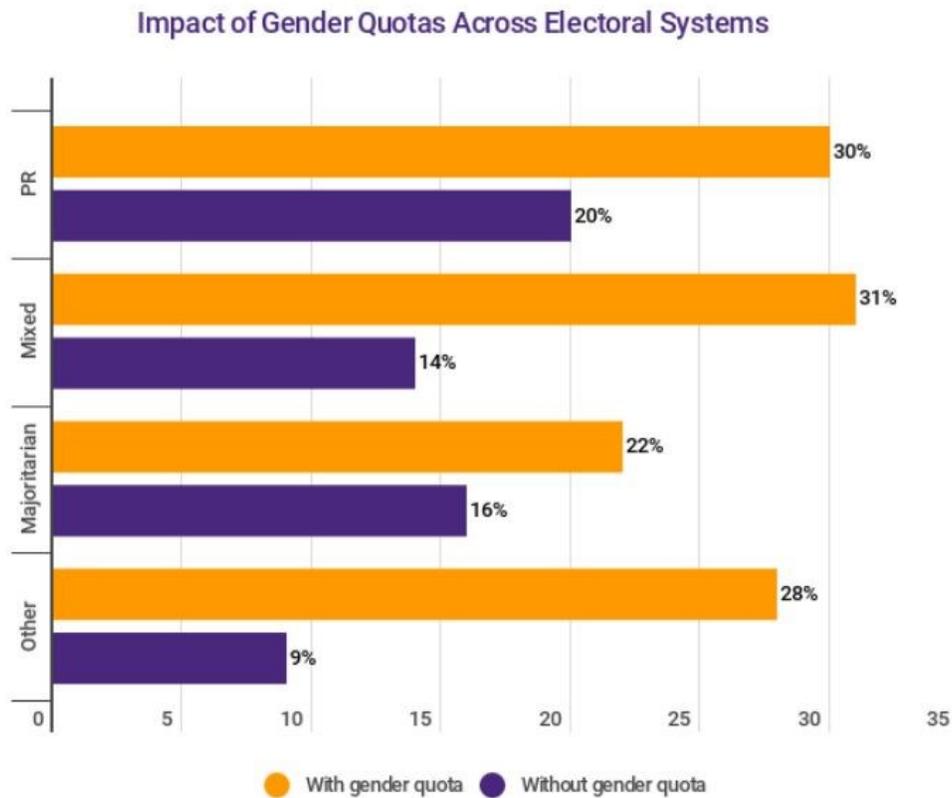


Figure 11. Comparison of women’s representation across electoral systems with or without gender quotas

## What makes some quotas more or less successful than others?

Though it is generally true that quotas are proven mechanisms for change in that they accelerate the rate at which women are achieving representation in all regions of the world, not all quotas are created equal, and some quotas are better enforced than others. Below are a few key features which tend to make some quotas more (or less) successful than others.

### **Features of Successful Implementation:**

- Supplementary regulation to prevent cheating (placement mandates),
- Legal sanctions for non-compliance (rejection of the list before the election),
- Supplementary public funding incentives (for parties to include more women on lists), and
- Financial sanctions for non-compliance (financial penalties for the parties)

### **Features of Less Successful Implementation:**

- Poor enforcement/lack of regulation,
- Lack of funding for women who run for office,
- Party resistance to the implementation of quotas, and
- Loopholes that enable parties to bypass the gender quotas

For quotas to be successful, there needs to be a genuine effort toward creating rules and processes ensuring that they will be met. In cases in which quotas are implemented but poorly enforced, their impact on women's representation is reduced.

Sources: Freidenvall et. al (2013)<sup>20</sup> and Bjarnegard et. al (2016)<sup>21</sup>

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20. Lenita Freidenvall, Drude Dahlerup, Emil Johansson. *Electoral Gender Quota Systems and their Implementation in Europe*. *European Parliament*. 2013. P 14 and 18. [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/note/join/2013/493011/IPOL-FEMM\\_NT\(2013\)493011\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/note/join/2013/493011/IPOL-FEMM_NT(2013)493011_EN.pdf)

21. Elin Bjarnegard and Par Zetterberg. "Political Parties and Gender Quota Implementation: The Role of Bureaucratized Candidate Selection Process." *Comparative Politics* 48.3. 2016. P 395-398. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24886211>

## Conclusion

Given that nations ranked highly for women’s representation have a form of proportional representation, a quota, or both, it is clear that rules and systems play an integral role in sustained progress toward gender parity. By looking to the reforms that other nations have adopted, the United States can develop its own systems strategies to advance women’s representation and leadership. There are many opportunities to change our electoral system and policies in the United States that can help us take similar steps toward parity.

### *Party Recruitment Targets*

One step toward parity is a commitment from political parties to set recruitment targets for women candidates. The 2018 U.S. midterms were historic, reaching an all-time high for the number of women running for federal elected offices. Despite this milestone, women still only made up 23% of all federal candidates.<sup>22</sup> Without an equal number of women and men running for office, we cannot achieve parity. Gender recruitment targets, similar to the voluntary party quotas used in other nations, can help ensure that women candidates are actively recruited to run for public office in order to bridge the gender gap for candidates. It is also integral that women candidates are recruited to run for open seats in both competitive districts or in districts favoring their party. Additionally, gender recruitment targets can have an even greater impact when paired with electoral reforms, like fair representation voting.

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22. Sarah Bryner and Doug Weber. *Gender Report: Women Candidates*. Center for Responsive Politics. March, 2018. <https://www.opensecrets.org/news/reports/women-candidates>

## *Fair Representation Voting*

Fair representation voting is a form of proportional representation for a candidate-based system. Unlike a winner-take-all system, which simply awards a seat to the person with the most votes, regardless of whether they receive majority support, fair representation voting works under the principle that a legislature should reflect all of the voters who elect them. In other words, in a fair representation voting system, voters elect representatives in proportion to their numbers, leading to representation that is more reflective of the people. One form of fair representation voting that helps create a more reflective government combines ranked choice voting with multi-winner districts.<sup>23</sup>

In a ranked choice voting (RCV) election, voters have the opportunity to rank candidates in order of preference. If no candidate receives majority support in first choices, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated. Those who ranked that candidate as their first choice have their ballots counted for their next choice. This process continues until a candidate wins a majority.<sup>24</sup> RCV provides more choices for voters and eliminates “vote-splitting,” which can hurt candidates from underrepresented communities. The system also minimizes strategic voting, mitigates the impact of money in politics, eliminates the need for runoffs, and promotes civil campaigning. These benefits can help even the playing field for women and historically underrepresented groups.<sup>25</sup>

In 2016, RepresentWomen conducted a study to assess the impact of RCV on the representation of women and people of color. Controlling for the impact of socio-economic, political, and electoral factors, the study found that implementing RCV in the Bay Area led to an increase in the percentage of city council candidates who are people of color and women of color. According to the study, “since the introduction of RCV, women have won more than 40% of all contests, women of color have won almost a quarter of all contests and people of color have won 60 percent of seats.”<sup>26</sup>

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23. *Fair Representation Voting*. RepresentWomen. [https://www.representwomen.org/fair\\_representation\\_voting](https://www.representwomen.org/fair_representation_voting)

24. *Ranked Choice Voting / Instant Runoff*. FairVote. [https://www.fairvote.org/rcv#how\\_rcv\\_works](https://www.fairvote.org/rcv#how_rcv_works)

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Ranked choice voting is used in numerous communities across the country. This past November, the state of Maine used RCV to elect its U.S. House of Representatives and a U.S. Senator. Currently, 9 cities use RCV for their city council elections. Of these cities, the average share of women on city councils is 49% - which is more than twice the average in non-RCV cities. Additionally, 36% of cities with RCV have women mayors compared to the average of 23% in the 100 most populous cities in the U.S.<sup>27</sup> <sup>28</sup> Combining RCV with multi-winner districts can create a more proportional system and lead to even more reflective political representation.<sup>29</sup> Multi-winner districts increase women’s representation because political parties make a greater attempt to appeal to as many voters as possible by recruiting more women to run and voters tend to balance their tickets.<sup>30</sup> Combining RCV with multi-winner districts limits the impact of bloc voting, which can disenfranchise voters of color in winner-take-all systems.<sup>31</sup>

### *Achieving Gender Parity in our Lifetimes*

According to our analysis, proportional election systems and quotas impact women’s political representation. The current single-winner, winner-take-all voting system that exists in the United States protects incumbents and fortifies the status quo. Nations closer to gender parity in elected office have taken intentional steps to bridge the gaps in their electoral systems. In order to realize the promise of American democracy, it is imperative that the United States follow suit and take intentional actions that drive us on the path toward a truly reflective democracy.

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## Glossary of Terms

**Closed Party List Proportional Representation** - the original form of party list voting in which the party fixes the order candidates are listed on a ballot

**Competitive District** - an electoral district that could reasonably be won by any candidate, regardless of political party

**Double Quota** - system in which the women on electoral lists are not permitted to be solely placed at the bottom of these lists (in which case the odds of their election would be slim); also considered a Placement Mandate

**Fair Representation Voting** - a form of proportional representation for a candidate-based voting system in which voters elect representatives in proportion to their number, leading to representation that is more reflective of the electorate

**Election Threshold** - the minimum share of the primary vote required before the candidate or party is entitled to representation

**Electoral System** - the rules and procedures that govern how power is distributed among political parties and candidates after an election

**Gender Quotas** - affirmative electoral thresholds which ensure that a predetermined number or percentage of candidates/representatives for a legislative assembly are women

**Incumbency Advantage** - the structural benefits belonging to candidates who already hold a contested seat; this may refer to their greater financial resources or name-recognition

**Indirect Election** - system in which elected representatives select the winners of an election

**Legislated Candidate Quota** - system in which the target composition of women on candidate lists is set by political parties; mandated either through national constitutions or by electoral legislation

**List Proportional Representation (List PR)** - a multi-winner system in which political parties nominate lists of candidates and electors vote for their preferred party; seats are allocated to each party according to their share of the vote

**Majority** - system in which a candidate must win over 50% of the vote to be elected; if no candidate wins the majority, then a runoff election is held between the leading candidates to determine the winner

**Mixed Voting System** - system which combines majoritarian and proportional representation voting

**Multi-Winner Districts (MWD)** - electoral districts that send two or more members to a legislative house; MWDs may generate more balanced representation than single-winner districts (SMDs); also known as a multi-member district

**Negative Campaigning** - process by which a candidate or party focuses on criticizing their opponents instead of advertising their own qualifications for the contested seat

**Open Party List Proportional Representation** - form of party list voting in which electors are presented with unordered lists of candidates to choose from; the most popular candidates rise to the top of the list and have a better chance of being elected

**Open Seat** - a race in which there is no incumbent

**Parity** - gender balance in which the ratio of representation of women to men is 50-50

**Party Quota** - voluntary commitments made by political parties to field or nominate a predetermined number or percentage of women candidates

**Placement Mandate** - rules about the rank order of candidates on electoral lists, designed to prevent parties from creating further disadvantages for women who run

**Plurality** - system in which the candidate with the most votes wins without a majority of votes

**Proportional Representation (PR)** - system in which seats are allocated according to the share of the vote each representative or party receives

**Ranked Choice Voting (RCV)** - system in which voters rank candidates in order of preference; a candidate receiving over 50% of the first preference votes will be declared winner; if no candidate receives a majority, then a series of runoff elections follows; the candidate with the fewest first choices is eliminated and their votes are transferred to voters' next choices ; the process continues until one of the candidates remaining has a majority of the votes and is declared the winner

**Recruitment Targets** - method by which women candidates are actively recruited to run for public office to bridge the gender gap in candidates

**Reserved Seat Quotas** - a system in which the gender composition of a legislative body is set by political parties. These quotas are mandated either through national constitutions or by electoral legislation

**Run-Off Election** - the second part of a two-round election in which no candidate obtained a majority after the first round; the two candidates who received the most votes in the initial round become the only candidates electors may choose from in round two

**Simple Majority** - a system in which a candidate winning the highest number of votes wins, even if they do not score an absolute majority

**Single-Winner Districts (SWDs)** - electoral districts in which one member is sent to a legislative house; also known as a single member constituency or single member district

**Strategic Voting** - when a voter does not vote in favor of their preferred candidate with the intention of preventing a candidate that they dislike from winning an election

**Supplementary Public Funding Incentives** - system in which parties are incentivized to include more women in party lists

**Vote Splitting** - electoral result in which the distribution of votes among similar candidates reduces the odds that any of them will win

**Winner-Take-All** - a plurality system in which every candidate receives a plurality of the vote wins; in a multi-member district election, the winner of the plurality vote takes all of the seats; in systems using an electoral college, the winner/winning party of the plurality vote takes all the electoral votes; also known as first-past-the-post (FPTP)

**Zipper System** - a system in which candidates on party lists are ordered in an alternating pattern between men and women

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