

POLITICAL PARTIES AND WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN LATIN AMERICA

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Introduction

Increasing women's presence in political decision-making positions has been advocated by development organisms, activists and academics as a means to strengthen democracy and to make policy-making processes more representative of wider sections of the population. The number of women represented in the political institutions of a given country is taken to provide a good indication of the health of its political system. There is strong evidence to suggest that the content of public policies changes when more women are incorporated into legislative spheres. Thus, increasing women's presence in political decision-making positions is thought to have a democratising function, improve political governance and lead to better representation of women's interests.

Political institutions and institutional designs may either foster or hinder the advancement of gender policies. Political parties, in particular, play a central role here, given their role in the political socialisation of citizens, recruitment and selection of candidates and development, coordination and representation of interests and ideological perspectives in political spheres. However, political parties are not gender neutral and they have not always been women-friendly, in-so-far as their internal rules and culture have tended not to favour women's political participation. But parties' responses to gender-related demands differ. Understanding what factors shape levels of parties' commitment and responsiveness to gender initiatives is important in order to define constraints and opportunities for actions and to guide definitions of gender strategies. This is the central aim of this paper. Focusing on the context of Latin America, it intends to assert when and under what conditions political parties best respond to gender-related demands.

Candidates' Selection and Women's Representation

Traditionally, parties have provided little encouragement to women's political empowerment. They have tended to approach gender issues from a strong instrumental perspective, employing topics related to women's autonomy and political representation as campaign rhetoric - used to attract female votes and to engage activists of the women's movement - which are readily sidelined once electoral contests are over. Equally, women's participation in their internal structures has been seen essentially as a useful vote-winning ploy - women can play a vital role as campaigners in elections and in disseminating parties' ideals at a grassroots level.

The number of women represented in parties' internal hierarchies and in elected positions is invariably small across the continent. This is a direct consequence of political parties failing to take the issue of women's under-representation, both in their internal leadership and in elected positions, as a serious issue of political concern. The stage of selecting candidates is central in granting citizens' access to political decision-making positions. Yet, women are usually disadvantaged in selection procedures. They may have larger networks at grassroots levels, which although valuable politically, is not automatically translated into political capital. Men on the other hand, tend to have established more wide-ranging alliances of the kind that matters most politically, such as with businesses and trade unions. They are better networked within political parties and more easily conform to political styles that have traditionally been more valued politically. Thus they are usually considered to be better

candidates and given preference over women as far as the selection of party leaders and candidates are concerned.

There is a generalized lack of transparency in processes of selecting parties' candidates. They might be chosen in party conventions, but normally this is a task performed by committees of party bosses without clearly specified criteria. More recently a few parties have held primaries to select their candidates. They have been employed, by some or by all political parties, in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Panama and Uruguay. Despite their democratic credentials, primaries have not necessarily worked to women's advantage. They tend to favour those candidates with more resources, which are usually not female, as well as obstructing the implementation of quotas. For example in 2003, a good proportion of the candidates of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) and the National Action Party (PAN), in Mexico were selected through primaries. The PRD selected 49.4 per cent of its candidates using this method (Baldez 2004). In districts of Mexico where primaries are held quotas are not binding. It has been suggested that primaries may have been used by these parties as a strategy to avoid implementing gender quotas (Baldez 2004).

One reason commonly put forward to explain the small percentage of women in political decision making positions, and thus to excuse political parties from selecting female candidates, is voter bias. However, public opinion polls have shown quite the contrary. A Gallup opinion poll (commissioned by the Inter-American Development Bank and the Inter-American Dialogue) carried out with 2,000 people in five major cities in the region, found that 57 per cent believed that more women in politics would lead to better governments; over 90 per cent would vote for a woman president; and 69 per cent believed their country would elect a woman as president in the following 20 years (Inter-American Dialogue, 2001). A Vox Populis opinion poll carried out in January 2000 in Brazil revealed similar results. According to this poll, women are considered more honest, trustworthy, competent, firm, capable, and responsible by the Brazilian electorate. It also demonstrated that 84 per cent of the electorate would vote for a woman for the position of mayor, 80 per cent would vote for a woman state governor, and 72 per cent would vote for a woman president (Fêmea 2000: 2). These data indicate that political parties may indeed be the main gatekeepers for advancing women to leadership positions.

Despite the many shortcomings, and a widespread lack of public confidence in political parties,¹ they are still key players in parliamentary democracies. Political parties remain central for representing women's interests in political arenas and for granting them access to decision-making positions. The question thus is how might agents who are interested in achieving gender equality manage to push beyond these glass ceilings? Can these institutions be made more accountable to women's interests? What factors can lead to an increase in the number of women in decision-making positions and help to improve their political influence? A number of structural, institutional and mobilising factors may contribute to this end. They are discussed below.

¹ According to Latinobarometro (2004), only 19 per cent of Latin Americans have any substantial degree of trust in political parties in the region. This figure is down from 28 per cent in 1997.

Political Opportunity Structures

External trends and internal factors affect political parties and may help provide legitimacy and strengthen struggles for gender equality. International political events such as the demise of communism and the globalization of the women's movement have played central roles in bringing political institutions closer to gender demands. Changes in the global political configuration at the end of the 1980s – driven by the crisis and then collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union - worked to destabilize old established certainties among left wing parties in Latin America and to weaken their traditional support base - the working classes. As a consequence, these organizations tried to strengthen their links with agents closer to grassroots and civil society groups, such as women, as a means of enlarging their political constituency. The growing participation of women in the labour market, in formal education, and in social movements of the last decades has helped further galvanise changes in the relationship between women and political institutions.

The internationalisation of the women's movement strengthened struggles for gender equality globally. From the beginning of the 1990s, international forums promoted by multilateral agencies have worked towards linking women's experiences, fostering international networks and alliances. The fourth UN World Conference on Women, in particular, played a key role in encouraging women's agency and in raising the profile of demands for gender equality. The preparatory stage of this conference impelled the coordination of women across political affiliations and organisational sectors (from governmental, non-governmental, and civil society sectors) in Latin America, who aimed at presenting a common policy agenda at that forum. Subsequently, the Beijing Platform for Action became an instrument used by women to press states and political parties to take positive steps to promote women's rights and political representation. This conference helped highlight issues of gender relations and to reinforce the idea that achieving social equality implies taking women's needs and interests into consideration. Beijing stressed the indivisible character of political and social rights, recommending the promotion of women to political decision-making positions as a stepping-stone for achieving gender equality.

Internal factors, that is, those aspects more closely linked to the nature of political parties are considered to affect their propensity to be more or less open to gender demands. The degree of institutionalisation² and the ideological identity of political parties, for instance, are taken to be important factors in determining their levels of commitment to gender related issues. Parties that are more institutionalised are said to respond more easily to gender demands, because their transparent structures and clearly specified set of rules make them more exposed to demands for accountability. Left and centre-left parties, as they support ideals of substantive equality and inclusive citizenship, are also considered more open to women's demands (Caul 1999, Norris 1993, Waylen 2003).³ Right wing parties may also endorse initiatives to promote gender equality and implement measures in support of women's rights, but the norm is that those on the left or centre will have started the trend of change.

² According to Norris (1993), party institutionalisation refers to a situation in which the internal rules of the party 'are detailed, explicit, standardised, implemented by party officials, and authorised in party documents' (327).

³ Some of these authors have particularly stressed the tendency of 'new left' types of parties, because of their greater connections to social movements, and their tendency to be more sympathetic towards women's demands (Caul 1999).

There seems to be some evidence to suggest that these interpretations hold true in Latin America. The more institutionalised parties from the left or centre-left have been first to adopt effective measures to promote women's political representation, such as quotas - which according to Lovenduski (1993) is a major indicator of their levels of commitment to gender issues.⁴ These parties also have the highest number of women both in their internal leadership and in elected positions. For example, the Workers' Party (PT) in Brazil and PRD in Mexico were the first political parties to adopt internal quotas in the region. In Brazil, parties that have consistently elected more women for national legislature positions are PT, Communist Party of Brazil (PC do B) and the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB). These parties are more institutionalised than their contemporaries and they are left-wing oriented.

Women's Political Agency and Bargaining Power

Existing difficulties have not impeded women from recognizing the important role political parties play. As opposed to the 1970s and the 1980s, when for fear of being co-opted many female activists strongly resisted integrating themselves into these organisations, they now focus instead on trying to find out how these institutions can be best influenced and changed from within.

Women's political agency has been critical in determining political parties' propensity to take on board gender-related demands. A great deal of positive changes accomplished in political parties and representative institutions were the result of women's leadership, coordination and strategic action within and across these organizations. Lately, women's branches in political parties and in governments have played a key role in promoting gender equality initiatives, as they have become more incisive in their demands and better organised. Rather than working mainly as party political supporters, promoting their interests and projects, as they had previously, women's branches are now functioning more as pressure groups in defence of women's interests. They have been acting strategically and with the support of key allies they have increased their resources and bargaining power to vigorously advocate gender initiatives. Below I consider some of the main actions undertaken by women to put pressure in political parties to pass and implement their demands.

Quotas

Gender quotas have been advocated as a strategy to compensate for bias and constraints found in processes of selecting party leaders and candidates. It is also considered that quotas strengthen women's political coordination and improve the degree and intensity of advocacies on gender issues. They have proved one of the most effective means to increase the number of women elected both in political party leadership structures and in legislatures.

⁴ The adoption of quotas is considered to give a good indication of the level of commitment of political parties to gender issues. According to Lovenduski (1993), there are three main strategies that define the level of response of political parties' to women's demands. They are: strategy of rhetoric, strategy of affirmative action, and strategy of positive discrimination (quotas). She places them in a continuum which gives the level of their commitment to gender issues. Those that had adopted quotas are considered to have a greater commitment to women's demands.

Leadership and candidate quotas have increasingly been adopted in the Latin America, becoming an effective means to increase women's presence in political decision-making bodies of the region. In Brazil, of the major political parties, only those with internal quotas have a representation of women in their leadership positions above 10 per cent (Sacchet 2007).⁵ Women's presence in political legislatures has gone up from an average of 9 per cent in 1990 to 21.6 per cent in 2007, making Latin America rank second among all the world's regions (IPU 2006). This proves that quotas are effective as a means to increase women's political leadership.

Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay and Peru now apply quotas in their candidates' lists to national legislatures. Venezuela passed this policy but then in 2000 made it unlawful, and Colombia has a quota law for executive positions and requires that 30 percent of all high-ranking decision-making positions of state agencies are filled with women.

Even though quotas have represented an important breakthrough for advancing women's presence in legislative positions in the continent, their success has not been uniform. They have worked best in countries where particular electoral system designs are in place, as well as when there are rules able to make them enforceable. In countries where the electoral system is Proportional Representation (PR), with closed candidates' lists, where there is a pre-established placement order for male and female candidates in the list, a large district magnitude from where candidates are selected, and where laws are in place to secure compliance with quotas, the number of women elected has increased quite significantly.

In the PR with open lists, candidatures are individualized. Rather than voting for a political party, voters select instead a candidate in the ballot paper. As campaigns are focused on competitions between candidates, they are more expensive and unequal. Candidates with more resources and better connections, which are usually not female, will have the upper hand. When the quota law does not establish the placement order of candidates in the list in accordance with the percentage of quotas (that is if the quota is of 30 per cent a female candidate should be placed in between two male candidates) the norm is that women will be placed at the bottom of the lists and thus stand fewer opportunities of being elected. Larger districts appoint higher numbers of candidates and as a consequence, women have more chances of being selected as candidates.⁶

Finally, most Latin America examples have demonstrated that if laws are not in place to block from registration those lists that failed to comply with quotas, political parties will almost invariably not comply with them. In Brazil, where a quota of 30 per cent has been in place since 1998, the average number of women selected as candidates for seats in the lower chamber has never exceeded 13 per cent. The electoral law in Brazil neither binds the registration of political parties' lists to the fulfillment of quotas, nor does it pre-establish any penalty in case of non-compliance with them. Thus in effect, the quota policy in Brazil is rather a recommendation, and leads to a situation whereby despite Brazil having one of the best organized women's movements in Latin America, it has one of the smallest percentages

⁵ For a full list of parties that have adopted quotas in Latin America see 'Quota Database', IDEA International. www.quotaproject.org

⁶ See Sacchet 2008 and Htun and Jones 2002 for further details on these variables.

of women in representative position of the lower chambers. In 2006, the number of women elected for these positions increased only slightly, from 8.2 per cent to 8.9 per cent. Below Brazil stand only Guatemala and Haiti, countries these, which are much less socially and economically developed and which have no quotas. So far, of the countries with a parliamentary democracy in the region, Argentina and Costa Rica have had the best results. This is so because all the conditions listed above are satisfied in the case of these two countries. On the other hand, among the countries with quotas in the region, Brazil, where these conditions are not fulfilled, is the one with fewer women represented in positions of the lower chamber.

Implementing gender quotas in political party structures has also not been straightforward. It has demanded much organizing and mobilizing by women to stop parties from bending the rules of this policy, either by putting women in standing in positions and/or failing to fill in the quotas percentage, as established in the law. When they have complied with it, this policy has most invariably been implemented only minimalistically: the percentages specified in the quota laws have become ceilings, rather than minimum percentages. Also, women have usually been selected for positions of little political clout and visibility.

Beyond its role in promoting women to decision-making position, quotas are also worthwhile as a means to raise awareness about gender related issues. The processes of campaigning for quotas, and the initiatives usually undertaken after its approval in order to encourage women to come forward as candidates and to train them politically, have provided visibility to issues of gender relations, helped to raised awareness on gender inequality issues, whilst at the same time, helped foster women's coalitions and political empowerment (Sacchet 2008).

Coalition Building

Building alliances with key agents, both internally and externally, helps to increase resources of the mobilising group and to lend legitimacy to their demands. Coalition building across political and social organisations has successfully been used by women to advance their ideas and policy agenda. Women's coalition has been useful in Chile during the military regime when, despite divisions in their parties, women organised independently to call for an end to the dictatorship (Baldez 2002). Similarly, in El Salvador, when women were excluded from the peace process, they formed a coalition called 'Mujeres 94' to use the election of 1994 to put pressure on the parties to listen to their demands (Friedman 2002, Luciak 2001). In Uruguay, despite many failed attempts to implement gender quotas, women have managed to pass gender related policies through strong advocacy and coordination. In Brazil, the women's organisation across political and social sectors is a well-known long-standing feature. Through this means they have managed to implement important gender policies in the constitution of 1988, and this strategy has been successfully employed ever since.⁷ These are

⁷ In 1995, hundreds of groups combined to form the *Articulação Nacional de Mulheres* (Women's National Coalition), a body that organised meetings in 25 Brazilian States in order to discuss proposals for the Women's Conference in Beijing. In the same year, their unanimous coalition within the National Congress was vital in approving the policy of quotas. In 2004, there were meetings in more than 2,000 municipalities all over Brazil in which more than 120,000 women (from government, the voluntary sector and grassroots groups) participated, then around 2,000 delegates attended a national conference in Brasília to discuss proposals for national planning on public policies for women.

a few illustrative examples only. In fact, coalition building among women has been widely used in Latin America and it has become one of women's main political tools.

Forging alliances with leaders in high-profile political positions (who usually happen to be men) has proved resourceful for advancing gender policies. For example, in Brazil, Mexico and Argentina, support from leaders in political parties and in congresses helped secure the approval and implementation of electoral gender quotas. This has also helped increase levels of support among party followers and trade union members, for the project of implementing internal quotas. In the PT and the Central Workers' Union (CUT) in Brazil, support from party leaders was considered a key factor leading to the approval of this policy (Sacchet 2002). In the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) in El Salvador and in the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in Nicaragua, alliances with political leaders helped to secure the introduction of gender initiatives in their policy programmes and propelled changes in their internal culture (Luciak 2001). Although achieving support from party leaders, for gender-related policies may not always be straightforward, they can be persuaded to champion these initiatives, either out of conviction of the fairness of the claims being made and/or to avoid attracting hostility from the agents advocating the changes. In gendered political structures such as political parties and parliaments, backing from those in prominent position of power helps create a favourable environment for the reception of gender-related demands.

Networking with the Media

Another strategy used by women is influencing the media. The mass media has an important function in political democracies. By selecting some issues as news, while leaving others aside, they help shape the political debate. Also, the way in which they frame these issues in the news, and in other programmes, influence public perceptions. Although it is difficult to get the media to focus on issues related to gender, certain tactics may be helpful. In Argentina and Brazil, for example, women have developed closer alliances with the press and strengthened their links with journalists sympathetic to their causes, thereby succeeding in attracting attention from the media at key political times. During the first mobilisation for quotas in Brazil, in 1991 in the Workers' Party, comments about this initiative in the media were usually negative. Those campaigning for quotas became objects of mockery and men who supported quotas were ridiculed and accused of paying lip service to the women's cause only to try to get 'closer' to women (Sacchet 2002). This has changed considerably in Brazil, as quotas have gained legitimacy and media professionals are better educated on gender issues. Women's groups have contributed to this change, as they have learned how to deal strategically with and build alliances within the media.

Strategic Communication

How arguments on women's rights and needs are framed is important in influencing public opinion, winning allies and supporters, and in putting pressure upon political institutions. When women in political institutions have communicated their aims strategically, working gender demands from within the ideological tenets of these organisations, they have increased their chances of political success. In Brazil for example, advocates of leadership and candidate quotas have based their claims on the notion of substantive equality and democracy, calling into question ideological principles stated in official documents such as in political

manifestos of parties and national constitutions, and international agreements signed by governments, in order to demand accountability from political institutions.⁸

Strategic argumentation is also useful in raising the profile of women's political role. By highlighting the role they play within political parties for example, in terms of winning votes and more generally, women have been able to grant credibility to their actions thus increasing their bargaining power and political leverage (Sacchet 2002).

Conclusions

Political parties can either promote or obstruct the development of gender initiatives. In Latin America, despite a number of existing constraints, the gender equality agenda has been advanced through the party system. Broader political, economic and cultural trends have contributed to this end. However, changes in the structures of political opportunities are not only driven by global structural factors. They are also, influenced by political agency. The many forums on gender, race, climate changes, population and so on, have been as much driven by changes in the system as by pressure exercised by social and individual agents at local and international levels.

Highly institutionalised and left-wing political parties seem to be more predisposed to take on board gender-related demands. However, a key element in determining higher levels of influence of gender demands in these organizations is the nature of women's political agency. The taking on board of gender claims has been favoured in organizations where women have a strong leadership, are well organised, knowledgeable about available political opportunities, and are able both to foster coalition with key allies and to coordinate their actions strategically. Although political structures play an important role in fostering changes in gender relations and in advancing political opportunities for women, social agents in turn have the capacity to influence political structures and to shape the nature of these changes.

Recommendations

Promoting women to political decision-making positions is an important condition to improve gender relations and to advance women's rights. Political parties are key players in parliamentary democracy and have the potential to help advance women's political leadership. In order to promote women to leadership positions a few recommendations are made below for political parties:

Political parties should

- Implement concrete measures to equalize women's and men's participation in decision-making positions, such the introduction of quotas, and implement them effectively.
- Make the necessary provisions to encourage women to participate in their activities, such as child care, and take into account women's needs when planning their activities

⁸ In the case of campaigning for quotas in the PT, this was achieved by women raising positions stated in the founding documents of the party, on women's right and gender equality. In the campaign for legislative quotas, women evoked both the national constitutions and international agreements signed by the government.

so as to avoid booking them for times when women are most likely to be unable to participate because of their family responsibilities.

- Value women's contribution at the grassroots level, taking them into account when evaluating political skills and resources of possible candidates.
- Select more female candidates in elections and provide effective support in their campaign.
- Increase women's presence in internal party decision-making bodies, encouraging their selection for positions of real political clout.
- Ensure that women are listed in winnable positions on candidate lists.
- Adopt clear and transparent rules in party constitutions.
- Promote political training for party leaders, members, and activists on issues related to gender inequality.
- Promote political training for women in which they are able to learn about legislative procedures, and campaign skills such as how to deal with the media, fundraising and so on.
- Increase political and financial support for women's branches and create a women's campaign fund.
- Adopt quotas and implement them effectively.

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