

DO GENDER QUOTAS IN POLITICS WORK? THE CASE OF THE 2011 POLISH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

Women's participation in Polish politics has never achieved a critical mass. Therefore a broad social movement of female activists launched an extraordinary campaign, resulting in changes in the electoral law. Gender quotas were introduced to the Polish electoral system in 2011, before parliamentary elections the same year. Nevertheless, female candidates still faced multiple barriers limiting their chances for electoral success and the percentage of women elected to Parliament increased merely from 21 to 24 percent. This article makes recommendations on how to improve the effectiveness of equalizing mechanisms in the electoral process.

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Polish women were given the right to vote in 1918, when Poland regained its sovereignty after the First World War. This was a huge success for the Polish suffrage movement (considering that France allowed female suffrage in 1944), which had succeeded in convincing politicians that, for democracy to prosper, women must be equal partners in rebuilding the country. 90 years after this triumph, following women's engagement in the Second World War and the fight for freedom from the communist regime, women's participation in the electoral process has once again emerged in the public debate.

In 2009, the Polish Women's Congress gathered thousands of women to share their discontent with the underrepresentation of women in Polish politics. They proposed an introduction of parity on electoral lists, which would guarantee half of all positions for women. At that time, female MPs constituted only one fifth of the Polish lower house of Parliament and no more than 15 percent of its upper house. This was far below the expectations of Polish society, which supported the idea of bringing women's voice to public debate.¹

After a series of political games and parliamentary intrigues, the desired parity (50 percent of female and male candidates) was not achieved. Nevertheless, the idea of equalizing political opportunities for women and men as electoral candidates remained important for women's NGOs. Thanks to their political skills and determination, a gender quota was introduced with the new Electoral Code of 2011, which guaranteed both women and men at least 35 percent of positions on the electoral lists. If an electoral committee did not fulfill this requirement, then the list would not be registered. This sanction turned out to be effective, as the number of female candidates to the lower house of Parliament doubled in comparison to the previous elections in 2007, exceeding 40 percent of positions on all electoral lists. However, the electoral result for women in 2011 was not as impressive. Since, barely a quarter of the MPs of the lower house are females. This means that the increase of women in the lower house amounted only to four percentage points, compared to the previous term of office.²

Does this mean that gender quotas do not work? Why were they not effective in the Polish case, while they proved useful in other countries such as Kyrgyzstan, Serbia,

1 See more: Małgorzata Druciarek, et al., *Women on the Polish Political Scene* (Warsaw: Institute of Public Affairs, 2012) pp. 8-10.

2 All data presented in the article are based on the research conducted by the Institute of Public Affairs between 2010 and 2012. The research consisted of quantitative analysis of women's presence on the electoral lists as well as qualitative inquiry. It was carried out both at the local and national level, covering local elections in 2010, and parliamentary elections in 2011.

or Belgium?³ The team of researchers involved in the project “Women in the electoral process”⁴ believes the problem is the lack of rank placement requirements in the Polish electoral system. Rank place requirements mean that certain positions on the electoral lists are reserved for women; i.e., one in the first three positions or two in each consequent five positions on the list. One of the most popular types of rank place requirements is the “zipper system” whereby female and male candidates are placed in alternate slots among the top 10 positions on a party’s candidate list.

According to a qualitative and quantitative research by the Institute of Public Affairs in Warsaw, being on the electoral list is merely the first step in the long journey to Parliament. In the case of Poland, the candidate’s position on the list itself appears to be the crucial factor. Political parties know many methods of placing women on the electoral lists without giving them any real chance of winning. The most obvious ploy is to reserve the places at the very end of the list for women.

Since voters cast their vote more frequently for the candidates positioned at the higher end of the list, being included in the first five positions on the electoral list significantly increases one’s chances in the election.

However, even if a candidate is placed at the top of the list of a party, it does not secure a place in parliament if the local electorate is negatively oriented towards that party. In Poland, eastern regions are traditionally more conservative, and more often choose right-wing parties compared to voters in western parts of the country. This means that the female leader of the Left in the East of Poland –even when she appears at the top of the electoral list– is significantly more disadvantageous than a woman at the fifth or sixth position on the list in western districts. In this case, there are actually “winnable” and “unwinnable” regions, estimated according to a specific party’s results in a specific district in the previous elections.

Nevertheless, even if women get a “winnable” position, it does not mean that their chances of being elected are equal to those of male candidates. Within the frames of

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3 For comparison please see: Pippa Norris and Mona Lena Kook, “Gender Equality in Elected Office: A Six-Step Action Plan,” *OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights*, 2011, p. 31, <http://www.osce.org/odihr/78432>

4 “Women in the electoral process” was a two-year project, carried out by the Institute of Public Affairs in Warsaw, aimed at identifying barriers preventing women from successful electoral run.

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Electoral. Even if women do appear on TV spots or on billboards, their image tends to be constructed on the basis of being a good manager of a household budget, while male candidates are presented as managers of national finances. The message is clear: men are suitable for politics, and women for housekeeping.

Considering all of these obstacles to winning elections, female candidates’ electoral results actually look increasingly promising. Women gained almost a quarter of all seats in the lower house of Parliament, the best result in the history of Polish democracy. However, if it were not for the Civic Platform Party’s policy of quasi-soft quotas, this number would probably be lower. The party, which is now governing together with the Polish People’s Party, decided to place at least one woman among the first three positions on the list and at least two among the first five. The percentage of the Civic Platform Party’s female MPs in the lower house effectively amounts to 35 percent, –exceeding the so-called “critical mass”– a percentage that gives a minority a chance to take part in the decision-making process.⁶ This example may be a good argument in favor of introducing a “zipper system”.

Unfortunately this system cannot be used in the other types of parliamentary elections, namely the ones for the upper house of Parliament. Parallel to the introduction of quotas and enabling men and women to be equally represented in the lower chamber, the Polish *Sejm* ordained that elections to the upper chamber would be organized according to a majority system. This means that committees from each electoral district may put up just one candidate. Considering the political parties’ overall attitude towards women, the chances for them to run for office are very low. In 2011, merely 14 percent of all senatorial candidates were females. As a result, only 13 women sit in the upper house, which is equivalent to 13 percent (there are 100 senators in the upper house).

5 Emilia Rekosz, *Kobiety i Mężczyźni w Telewizyjnej Kampanii Wyborczej*, [Women and Men in the TV Electoral Campaign] (Warsaw: Institute of Public Affairs, 2011).

6 Drude Dahlerup, “The Story of the Theory of Critical Mass,” *Politics and Gender*, Vol.2, No.4, December 2006, p. 511-522.

In order to answer the question “do quotas in politics work?” we need to consider the specific conditions around their introduction as well as the political climate and cultural background of the country, including the position of women in society. The lesson from the Polish experience is that gender quotas have to be accompanied with many additional mechanisms that will make them practically effective.

The barriers to women’s political careers identified during the project “Women in the electoral process”, allows the formulation of recommendations in three areas that require some specific changes in order for the voice of women to be heard equally well as that of men. The key areas that influence the presence of women in politics include legislation, –in particular, the electoral law–, democracy inside political parties, and public debate.

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The aim of introducing gender quotas on election lists as part of the legislative changes, was to ensure an equal starting point for men and women in the electoral race. However, as mentioned above, being included to the list is just the first small step on the way to success. The position that a male or a female candidate occupies on the list of a given party is of key importance. Thus, the Institute of Public Affairs recommends the mechanism alternating men and women on the list, known as the “zipper system”. It is used by political parties in countries such as Sweden, Germany, and Slovenia. This allows for equal opportunities for men and women in the electoral process.

This mechanism cannot, however, be used in the case of single-member districts, the impact of which is discussed earlier. A majority electoral system is not conducive to increasing the participation of women in public life, as only one candidate is promoted in each electoral district. Research done by the IPA within the framework of the project “Women in the electoral process” shows that lack of democratic mechanisms for nominating candidates favors men’s chances of nomination while limiting those of women. This leads to another recommendation: returning to a proportional representation system in the elections to the upper house of Parliament, and in local elections at the municipal level. Realizing that arguments favoring a majority electoral system tend to overshadow its drawbacks related to reducing women’s chances for electoral success, various other mechanisms applied in different countries,

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whose aim is to make men and women equally present in the electoral process under majority electoral systems, have to be taken into consideration.

There are also additional factors, not directly related to the electoral system or the way in which election lists are compiled, which influence the percentage of women in elected bodies and which, at the same time, may be controlled by way of legal

regulations. Such a factor is, for instance, presence of women in campaign advertisements broadcasted by electoral committees on public TV. In view of the results of the studies mentioned above, an effective solution could be an obligation imposed on the National Broadcasting Council to monitor the proportion of male and female candidate appearances in campaign commercials.⁷

Another area which, unlike the legal system, requires fundamental change is democracy within political parties. As the analyses carried out by the Institute of Public Affairs show, political parties in Poland are struggling with the problem of oligarchization, have a poor member base, the quality of their candidates is low, and the control over their finances is limited to a small group (the *clique*). The manner of compiling election lists is one of the symptoms of limited democracy in Polish political parties. This situation is unfavorable for the appearance of new male or female leaders, and tends to preserve the *status quo*. Hence, this imperfect operation of democratic mechanisms within the parties negatively affects the participation of women, both in the leadership of the parties and in the local and central authorities.

The last area which requires change for women to have the same chances as men to access elected bodies is the general public sphere. Gender stereotypes, unequal division of household duties, and reinforcement of traditional gender roles by educational system hinder women’s presence beyond private sphere. Strengthening women’s participation in public life does not require legislative changes or influence over the internal regulations of political parties. However it does not mean that this change is easy to achieve. For example, a multifaceted debate on the political priorities of men and women should be encouraged. The success of such a transformation of the public sphere depends on some profound changes in numerous aspects of Polish public debate.

⁷ Emilia Rekosz, (2011).