

Democratic Crisis, Right Turns, and Women's Political Participation: Costa Rica's 2018 Elections in Comparative Perspective¹

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I. Introduction

The chapters in this volume offer rich and complex accounts of the 2018 elections in Costa Rica. From explaining how public opinion on gay marriage and abortion shaped the presidential race to examining the political participation of young women, marginalized women, and religious women, the chapters document how voters, activists, and political elites experienced the elections. Together, the chapters constitute required reading for those looking to understand Costa Rica at a pivotal moment: voters across Latin America and the globe are turning to right-wing populists and authoritarians (Blofield, Ewig, and Piscopo, 2017; Graff, Kapur, and Walters, 2019), but a majority of Costa Ricans chose a party with progressive positions on social issues. For this reason, the chapters also provide an invaluable opportunity to situate the Costa Rican case in a global context, drawing lessons for the future of liberal democracy and the roles of women in this future.

To begin, Costa Rica is not immune from voters' increasing dissatisfaction with traditional elites, whom they associate with democracy's failure to deliver on its promises of increased wellbeing. In electing Carlos Alvarado of the Partido Acción Ciudadana (PAC), Costa Rica avoided the right turn that has afflicted countries from the Americas to Eastern Europe, but just barely. Carlos Alvarado's opponent in the second round, conservative evangelical Fabricio Alvarado of the Partido Restauración Nacional (PNR), won the first round by capitalizing on citizens' fears of crime and social change. Costa Rica, like advanced and developing democracies worldwide, faces rising public anger about crime, corruption, and economic and material insecurity. This dissatisfaction has fueled voters' rejection of politics-as-usual, one that had—until recently—entailed the expansion of political and social rights for women, gay and trans individuals, the poor, and other marginalized groups. Like British citizens voting in 2016 to leave the European Union and Brazilian voters choosing an openly-autocratic president in 2018, many Costa Rican voters desired a polity re-founded on traditional values, with less tolerance for difference and diversity and more strong-arm enforcement of law and order.

Women's political participation and representation cannot be separated from this broader context. Costa Rica's parity law is among the strongest in Latin America and the world (Piscopo, 2018). A record number of women—and a record number of young women—ran as candidates and won seats in the assembly. Yet parity applies to all political parties equally, meaning that

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women from all parties benefit from positive action. Elected women are diverse in their ideology and policy goals, even within nominally left parties. As several authors in this volume mention, Carlos Alvarado's supporters were united in their opposition to Fabricio Alvarado, but did not share a coherent ideology. For instance, many religious women of diverse traditions formed part of the alliance designed to defeat Fabricio Alvarado in the second round.

Further, activist women and elected women are becoming more internally diverse at the same time as a backlash against women's political presence and against gender equality policies is spreading worldwide (Graff, Kapur, and Walters, 2019; Krook, 2017). Right-wing groups, including many women activists, have mobilized against "gender ideology": in their view, gender equality erases the natural differences between men and women and threatens the social order. Consequently, these groups oppose not just LGBTQ rights, but any gender equality policies—like contraception and abortion—that would distance women from their roles as mothers.

In showing how these turbulent times shaped the Costa Rican elections, the chapters remind scholars, policymakers, and pundits to resist simple narratives about women's role in politics. This complexity also resonates outside Costa Rica. Women's representation in the world's legislatures is increasing, even as left and center parties are losing elections. Leaders and participants of social movements, especially feminist social movements, must address the differences in their ranks without fracturing, as unity remains necessary to confront rising backlash. The anti-gender ideology movement is global in scope, challenging gender equality protections not just in Latin America, but in Western Europe, Eastern Europe, and South and East Asia (Korolczuk and Graff, 2018; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017).

Placing Costa Rica in comparative perspective thus illuminates these global trends. In the next section, I discuss the broader crisis of democracy and left-wing politics in Latin America and the globe. I then review the principal contributions of each chapter, drawing connections between their work and situating their findings in relation to democratic crisis, right shifts, and women's political participation and representation. I conclude with reflecting upon what women's increased participation as activists and elected officials can and *cannot* do given rising right-wing challenges to liberal democracy.

II. The Crisis of Democracy and Latin America's Right Turn

In 1998, voters in Venezuela elected Hugo Chávez. His presidency marked the start of Latin America's left turn. Eleven of the eighteen democratic Latin American countries elected left-wing governments between 1998 and 2015 (Blofield, Ewig, and Piscopo, 2017). Presidents from left parties governed more than half of Latin America, usually with majority or plurality support in legislatures. Most left parties offered social democratic rather than communist visions (hence the appellation of "pink" rather than "red"), though some took more radical stances while others tacked center or right once in office (Levitsky and Roberts, 2011; Weyland, 2009). The pink tide was buoyed by a commodity boom, which governments used to expand social programs benefiting the poor, the elderly, and the infirm. Non-left governments expanded these programs as well (Filgueira and Martínez Franzoni, 2017). For the first time in Latin America's history, socioeconomic inequality declined in a region famous for its severe income gaps (López-Calva and Lustig, 2010).

The expansion of social policies coincided with reforms designed to empower women, indigenous peoples, and gay and trans individuals. By 2015, every Latin American country save

Guatemala and Venezuela had adopted gender quota laws, which require that political parties run specified percentages of women candidates. That year, women held about 25 percent of seats in the region's lower or single chambers. Women presidents governed some of the region's most important countries: on the left, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner of Argentina (2007-2015), Dilma Rousseff of Brazil (2011-2016), and Michelle Bachelet of Chile (2006-2010 and 2014-2018), and on the center-right, Laura Chinchilla of Costa Rica (2010-2014). In the Andes, left governments in Ecuador and Bolivia wrote new Constitutions that recognized their countries as multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual; granted rights and autonomy to indigenous peoples; and even recognized the land as a bearer of rights (Radcliffe, 2012; Yashar, 2005). Argentina and Uruguay legalized gay marriage in 2010 and 2013, respectively (Diez, 2015), and Argentina passed a landmark gender identity law in 2011, mandating trans individuals' rights to sex reassignment and to official documents in their chosen gender. Though not all Latin American countries progressed on women's, indigenous, and LGBTQ rights to the same degree—and reproductive rights saw backsliding in some cases (Blofield and Ewig, 2017)—the direction of change in the first fifteen years of the new millennium was largely progressive.

Even so, discontent was spreading. Scholars began diagnosing Latin America's crisis of representation and democracy in the late 1990s, highlighting increasing citizen dissatisfaction with the traditional parties, resultant party system fragmentation, and the rise of anti-institutional outsiders as political leaders (Mainwaring, 2006; Roberts and Wibbels, 1999). Many of these outsiders (like Chávez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia) embraced populism and would become key pink tide presidents. Many pink tide presidents like Bachelet came from institutionalized and programmatic political parties, but increased populism in many countries led scholars to debate whether Latin America's left turn reflected democracy at work or a troubling rise of anti-system sentiments (Levitsky and Roberts, 2011; Murillo, Oliveros, and Vaishnav, 2010).

No matter the diagnosis, the symptoms were clear: in the late 1990s and throughout the 2000s, levels of citizen trust in political institutions plummeted, frustration with corruption and crime increased, and support for democracy and perceptions of regime legitimacy declined (Fernandez and Kuenzi, 2010; Seligson, 2002; Smith, 2012). Data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project confirms these trends. Between 2004 and 2012—the heart of the pink tide—over 50 percent of citizens in most Latin American countries distrusted the political parties.² Levels of distrust peaked before the 2009 elections in Ecuador and Paraguay, with 76 and 82 percent of voters, respectively, distrusting the parties. In the same period, an estimated 80 percent of Latin Americans viewed corruption as widespread³: country-level figures ranged from a low of 69 percent in Brazil in 2010 to a high of 94 percent in Argentina in 2007 (Funk, Hinojosa, and Piscopo, 2019, p.7). Costa Ricans manifested relatively less dissatisfaction compared to their neighbors, but the figures remained concerning (Cascante and Vindas, this volume). For instance, in 2006, 56 percent of voters distrusted the political parties; 48 percent felt unsafe due to crime; 84 percent perceived corruption as widespread; and 41 percent were dissatisfied with democracy.

Latin American voters' right turn in the mid-2010s thus appears unsurprising. By June 2019, right-wing presidents had won the presidency in nine countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile,

² Measured as the proportion of respondents choosing 1, 2, and 3 on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 indicates no trust and 7 indicates a lot of trust. Dataset from Funk, Hinojosa, and Piscopo (2017).

³ Measured as the proportion of respondents choosing “common” or “very common” when assessing how widespread corruption is among public officials (Funk, Hinojosa, and Piscopo, 2019).

Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Paraguay, and Peru. Security and anti-corruption concerns (as well as concerns about jobs and the economy) dominate the electoral and political agendas throughout the region. In Costa Rica, the PNR's 2018 platform called for ending the "perverse system of justice" that protected criminals over victims (Guillén Araya, this volume). In Argentina, president Mauricio Macri cracked down on gangs and proposed arming the police with stun guns (Rasqewski and Garrison, 2019). Elsewhere, the embrace of the right has taken an even harder line. Chileans reelected Sebastián Piñera in 2017, and his initial cabinet appointments included interior and justice ministers with ties to the 1973-1990 Pinochet dictatorship (Kozak, 2018). Brazilians elected Jair Bolsonaro in 2018, a leader who said a "good criminal is a dead criminal" and whose supporters echoed this sentiment at rallies by waving their hands in the shape of guns (Robb Larkins 2019). The right turn may be driven by "left fatigue" (Encarnación, 2018) and may represent "a routine alternation of power" (Anria and Roberts, 2019), but the fact remains that many voters have expressed preferences for security, prosperity, and stability, at potentially high costs to human rights.

As such, the right shift marks a broader backlash against the social progress that characterized the pink tide. Another factor fueling voters' right turn is rising Evangelicalism, which has eroded the Catholic Church's historic dominance. In 2014, Pew Research reported that while just 9 percent of Latin Americans were raised Protestant, 19 percent currently practice. Evangelicals constituted about 20 percent of the population in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua in 2013 (Somma et. al., 2017), with more recent estimates raising that figure to 40 percent (Malamud, 2018). Figures for Brazil range from 20 percent (Malamud, 2018) to 30 percent (Smith, 2018). Evangelical voters do not yet comprise the majority of the population, but they have become sizable minorities—and large enough to play significant roles in recent electoral contents. The Colombian peace agreement contained reparations aimed specifically at women and LGBTQ citizens, and Protestant voters' mobilization against these measures led to the accord's defeat in the 2016 referendum (Beltrán and Creely, 2018). Evangelicals' opposition to gay marriage helped catapult Fabricio Alvarado into the second round of Costa Rica's election (Cascante and Vindas, this volume; Guillén Araya, this volume), and they enthusiastically supported Bolsonaro's campaign in Brazil (Smith, 2018).

Evangelicals oppose what they term "gender ideology." This fluid term encompasses opposition to gay rights, reproductive rights, and sex education in schools, among other policies, on the (alleged) grounds that such policies privilege feminists' and progressives' distinction between biological sex and socially-constructed gender. They fear that gender ideology, in eroding traditional gender roles, thus destroying the family and destabilizing society. Their political influence extends beyond the ballot box, and they often ally with Catholic voters and leaders to achieve their political aims (Corrêa, 2018).

For instance, before evangelicals helped defeat the peace accords in Colombia, they mobilized against a 2015 Constitutional Court decision that required educational materials to reduce discrimination and bullying based on sexual and gender identity (Beltrán and Creely, 2018). The education minister at the time lost her job. Similarly, protests in Peru organized under the banner "con mis hijos, no te metas" resulted in the president naming a new education minister, one who favored removing references to gender in schools (The Economist, 2018). A bus with the same slogan campaigned against gay marriage in Mexico (The Economist, 2018) and against abortion liberalization in Chile (Corrêa, 2018). Though primarily a right-wing phenomenon, left-wing governments, particularly those with a populist bent, also have adopted "anti-gender" positions. Ecuador's Rafael Correa has decried gender ideology's attack on the

traditional family and the Bolivian Supreme Court struck down a gender identity law because “the dignity of the person is rooted in the natural sexual binary of the human” (Corrêa, 2018).

The anti-gender movement even threatens policy gains previously viewed as settled, such as gender quota laws. Argentina passed the region’s and the world’s first quota in 1991, and the trend has moved from gender quotas of 30 or 40 percent towards gender parity, meaning candidate lists comprised of 50 percent men and 50 percent women (Piscopo, 2016a). Eight Latin American countries have exchanged their quotas for parity, and parity bills have been introduced in the remainder. Yet in Paraguay in 2018, the Chamber of Deputies removed the gender parity provision from the gender parity bill—passing a gender parity law that contained no provision for gender balance in candidacies! Overlooking the women in Paraguay’s parties who long had fought for a stronger quota law, opponents argued that “an international lobby promoting gender ideology” was fronting the bill (*ABC Color*, 2018).

None of the trends described here are limited to Latin America. Voters across the globe have turned to right-wing leaders, many of whom—like Donald Trump, elected president of the United States in 2016, and Boris Johnson, elected British Prime Minister in 2019—express not just authoritarian tendencies, but also misogynistic, racist, homophobic and xenophobic views. The anti-gender ideology movement is transnational in scope, scoring victories that have blocked or rolled back freedoms for women and LGBTQ peoples in places as diverse as Hungary and South Korea. Quite simply, a backlash to liberal democracy and its related expansion of who counts as full and equal members of the polity is gaining strength worldwide (Graff, Kapur, and Walters, 2019). It is against this backdrop that this volume’s chapters explore women’s political participation and representation in the 2018 Costa Rican elections.

III. Backlash and Women’s Activism in the 2018 Elections

Two chapters in this volume explore how citizen dissatisfaction, on the one hand, and fears of gender ideology, on the other, shaped the 2018 elections. María José Cascante and Priscilla Vindas describe the anti-establishment mood among Costa Rican voters beginning in the 2000s, the resultant fragmentation of the traditional party system, and the increasing divisions among Costa Rican society on political and social lines. One such division is among those who perceive gender ideology as the enemy, and those who do not. As elsewhere in Latin America, gender ideology entered public discourse via debates over new guides for sexual education in schools, forcing the political parties to choose sides. A further “religious shock”—as Cascante and Vindas call it—came in January 2018, with the Inter-American Court of Human Rights’ decision recognizing the rights of same-sex couples and the right to choose a gender identity. Fabricio Alvarado campaigned against the social danger posed by sexual education and LGBTQ rights, and Carlos Alvarado became the candidate who would, in defeating Fabricio Alvarado, preserve Costa Rica’s commitments to human rights and democracy.

María José Guillén Araya delves further into how voters’ concerns shaped the electoral landscape. Turning to fears related to security and sexuality, she reminds readers that Costa Ricans’ conservative views have roots in, but are not solely determined by, religious belief. Guillén explains the connectivity between tough-on-crime and anti-reproductive rights stances. Both views originate in an obsession with bodily control and protecting the sanctity of life. Those who harm the sanctity of life, whether criminal deviants or women exerting sexual and reproductive autonomy, are an “other” that deserve the maximum punishment. At the same time, Guillén’s analysis of public opinion data finds that Costa Ricans are significantly less unified in

their views on reproductive rights when compared to their views on security: whereas 77 percent of survey respondents believe in the harshest punishment possible for criminals, only 42 percent agree that women should not have abortions.

Guillén's point about Costa Ricans' disparate views on sexual and reproductive rights underscores why women of diverse ideologies would join the citizen coalition that mobilized to defeat Fabricio Alvarado in the election's second round. Ana Jael Cutimanco Huamán, Karolina Mora Blanco, Nidia Fonseca Rivera, Priscilla Barredo Pantí, Sara Baltodano, and Sharo Rosales Arce analyze the role played by women and feminist leaders of different religions. Their chapter provides valuable insight—relevant not just for the Costa Rican case—about how Evangelical leaders mobilize their followers. Pentecostal churches exist independently of each other, but pastors and adherents are linked through radio and social media. The sheer number of individual churches, and the ability to use media to rapidly spread the same message to many churches, allowed the PNR to reach and activate large numbers of the faithful. In response, feminist theologians formed *La Red de Teólogas, Pastoras, Lideresas, y Activistas Cristianas* (TEPALI). The network's core message was that a religious worldview that degrades women and other marginalized groups cannot be consistent with the love of a higher power, no matter how this higher power is conceived.

TEPALI's work supported the broader anti-PNR mobilization that feminists organized through the group "Mujeres en Acción," as Tania Rodríguez Echavarría describes in her chapter. Like TEPALI, Mujeres en Acción emerged as a multifaceted coalition of women, allied with the common goal of defeating Fabricio Alvarado and protecting Costa Rican society from increasing discrimination, hostility, and violence. The movement built from previous feminist organizing around the elections: in 2017, feminists articulated a manifesto that made policy demands of all the parties in the election. This process reactivated conversations and collaboration among women's organizations, facilitating the formation of Mujeres en Acción in 2018. Mujeres en Acción's strategy depended on recuperating the past in order to protect the future. Their work reminded Costa Rican voters of the issues at stake: they devised a timeline of landmark women's rights policies in Costa Rica, sharing this timeline through cartoons, visual displays, and workshops. They especially targeted the districts where Fabricio Alvarado had received high proportions of the first-round vote.

Taken together, the analyses in these four chapters parallel social and political developments elsewhere. Costa Rica is not alone in experiencing a backlash to the expansion of social and political rights, followed by progressives' mobilization to protect existing and future gains. Popular definitions of backlash focus on moments wherein actors take concerted action to preserve the status quo, deploying feverish rhetoric about social decay and even threatening or using violence (Mansbridge and Shames, 2008; Piscopo and Walsh, 2020). Backlash further attracts new opponents to its cause, as individuals with socially conservative views—who during "normal" times are perhaps willing to support some amount of progress—join with reactionaries to retrench against the advancement of historically marginalized groups (Piscopo and Walsh, 2020). Backlash coalitions are internally heterogeneous, but united in their fear of change.

Both items—the diverse coalition and the assault on change—characterized backlash in the Costa Rican case. As Rodríguez Echavarría notes in the beginning of her chapter, the PNR coalition attracted support not just from evangelicals and members of other conservative religions, but also from legislative candidates belonging to Costa Rica's traditional political parties, the Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN) and the Partido Unidad Social Cristiano (PUSC). The PNR's agenda indeed sought to halt future advances as well as "question and annul gains

already won from decades back,” as Cutimanco Huamán et al write. *Mujeres en Acción* sought to counter this threat by highlighting the progress on women’s rights already made. The mobilization led by *Mujeres en Acción* reminded voters that the stakes centered not just on the issues explicitly raised by the anti-gender movement (sex education, gay marriage, and abortion) but on the issues their agenda implicitly targets (such as women’s right to education and employment). That this reminder helped some voters choose Carlos Alvarado over Fabricio Alvarado suggests that those resisting backlash should use the heterogeneity of backlash coalitions to their advantage, identifying those who can be persuaded to protect, rather than repeal, recent gains.

Mujeres en Acción also forms part of a regional and global revitalization of broad-based women’s and feminist movements. As Rodríguez Echavarría notes, large-scale feminist organizing declined in Costa Rica in the 2000s. This decline happened throughout Latin America. Broad-based social movements, so pivotal in democratization, fractured into distinct groups of professional women’s rights organizations, each focused on their particular issue area, such as violence against women *or* abortion. These organizations formed issue networks (Jaquette, 2009; Htun, 2003), and they focused on making policy. Issue networks certainly supported each other’s advocacy, but mass demonstrations around women’s rights became less frequent in the 1990s and the 2000s. This professionalization of the women’s movement did result in legal reforms: issue networks won gender quotas, laws combatting violence against women, and sexual and reproductive health reforms (Blofield and Ewig, 2017; Friedman, 2009; Marx, Borner and Caminotti, 2007; Piscopo, 2014a). Yet by the end of the pink tide, issue networks could not channel growing anger about states’ failure to implement laws and to protect women from abuse. Latin American women recently have returned to the streets, as illustrated in the #niunamenos marches against violence against women, for instance. As the Costa Rican case demonstrates, countering backlash coalitions will require not (only) legislative lobbying, but social movements grounded in civil society.

At the same time, Vanessa Beltrán and Diana Fernández’s chapter reminds readers that not all women are as empowered as the feminist leaders and activists of TEPALI and *Mujeres en Acción*. Beltrán and Fernández interviewed 20 women outside of Costa Rica’s urban, central valley, finding that respondents saw their democratic participation as limited to voting—even though choosing candidates every four years did not produce notable changes in their lives. Through voting, the women expressed their identity as Costa Ricans and their allegiance to democratic values and processes. Yet they do not see politics as a space they can occupy, influence, or contest. As *Mujeres en Acción*, TEPALI, and other actors look beyond the 2018 elections and seek to hold the Alvarado administration accountable for fulfilling its campaign promises, Beltrán and Fernández’s analysis cautions that not all voices are heard equally in the electoral and political process.

IV Gender Parity and Electing Women to Legislatures

Even as the 2018 elections hinged on two competing visions for how Costa Rica would treat women (and members of other marginalized groups), the electoral rules themselves ensured that record numbers of women entered the legislative assembly. Costa Rica adopted parity in 2009, interpreted by the Tribunal Suprema de Elecciones (TSE) as the alternation of men’s and women’s names down the list (called “vertical parity”). Parity first applied in 2014, but the results were disappointing: just 33.3 percent women were elected, less than the 38.6 percent

elected under the 40 percent quota in the 2010 elections. Party system fragmentation coupled with men's dominance of the list-header position contributed to this result (Piscopo, 2018). Citizen dissatisfaction resulted in more parties contesting the elections, and more parties meant that fewer parties won two or more seats in a district—so most parties elected only their list-header (Picado León and Brenes Villalobos, 2014). By 2018, the Constitutional Court had mandated that parity included “horizontal parity,” meaning that men's and women's names should also alternate across the list-header positions. This critical decision raised the proportion of women elected in 2018 to 45.6 percent.

The adoption of vertical and horizontal parity emerged from a much longer history of reforms. As Carla Morales Rojas details in her chapter, women's rights in Costa Rica were advanced first in the battle for suffrage, granted in 1949, and later beginning in the 1970s, as women contested discrimination more broadly. In 1990, Costa Rica passed the Law for the Promotion of Women's Social Equality, which advanced women's rights from schools to the workplace. In the political sphere, the law mandated an end to discrimination in public and administrative offices and mechanisms to promote women's engagement and training within the political parties. The 1990 law was followed by the 1996 revisions to the electoral code, which adopted the 40 percent gender quota. Then, for the next two decades, women in the parties would work with the TSE to adopt regulations that improved the quotas' effectiveness, such as resolution number 1863-1999, which required that women be placed in electable list positions. Throughout the late 1990s and the 2000s, the TSE typically acted in ways that protected women's access to nominations, until the adoption of parity in 2009—when the TSE interpreted the parity law as applying vertically but balked at applying parity horizontally.

As María José Cascante explains in her chapter, getting the TSE to mandate horizontal parity would require a court order. Cascante picks up the chronology of women's electoral rights from Morales Rojas. She argues that the parity principle consolidated in Costa Rica because the political parties had high levels of internal organization. The institutionalization of the political parties created space for women inside the parties to collaborate in pressing party leaders for greater change. Women then formed institutions within the legislature to support the redaction and passage of gender equality legislation, including quota and parity reforms. The legislative Commission on Women's Affairs was created in 1999, and the Technical Unit for Equality and Gender Equity in 2009. Through these latter institutions, women deputies mobilized to bring before the Constitutional Court a claim against the TSE's narrow interpretation of parity.

Costa Rica's journey from a weak quota to vertical and horizontal parity echoes the story elsewhere in Latin America. Throughout the region, women organized within political parties and the legislature have played critical roles in reforming quotas and adopting parity, from Bolivia (Htun and Ossa, 2013) to Mexico (Piscopo, 2016b). Women have brought cases before constitutional courts and electoral management bodies, and these institutions largely have enforced women's right to be elected (Piscopo, 2015). The presence of women also transforms how legislatures operate, from the formation of women's committees, caucuses, and technical units (Piscopo 2014b; Sawyer and Turner 2016) to the composition of standing committees (Barnes 2016). For Costa Rica, Morales Rojas notes the formation of the Parliamentary Group of Women Deputies in the 2018-2022 Assembly, and documents women's increasing presence, and even their dominance, on important legislative commissions, such as international relations (56 percent women) and constitutional matters (60 percent women). These changes came about because the new woman president of the assembly, Carolina Hidalgo, insisted on respecting parity in commission membership.

Carolina Hidalgo was elected at age 34, one of eight women aged 35 and under at the moment of their election. Argentina Artavia Medrano and Marcela Piedra Durán's chapter discusses the election of young women, revealing that women comprised larger numbers of younger age cohorts than men. For instance, women comprised 180 of the 347 *propietario* candidates (52 percent) under age 40. They comprised eight of the twelve deputies (67 percent) elected below age 35, and twelve of the nineteen deputies (63 percent) elected below age 40. Turning to young women's electoral participation, Artavia Medrano and Piedra Durán also find that youth voters abstain less than voters from older generations. The high levels of youth electoral engagement contradict narratives that blame youth for Costa Rica's turn to anti-establishment thinking.

Narratives are also examined in the chapter by Ileana Aguilar Olivares and Johanna Barrientos Fallas, who study how the Costa Rican press framed women's candidacies and the parity requirements. Parity might enjoy widespread support in public opinion polls throughout Latin America (Piscopo, 2016a), but Aguilar Olivares and Barrientos Fallas' analysis reveals that discourses of parity as an electoral right do not appear in the Costa Rican press. Rather, newspaper stories frame parity as a legal obligation, one stemming from the Constitutional Court's decision, and a significant headache for the political parties to implement appropriately. The press thus creates a "battle of the sexes" narrative, pitting men and women against each other in a zero-sum game for nominations. These narratives imply that women receive nominations not because they earn them, but because parties are compelled to take candidacies away from men and give them to women. Similarly, Carlos Alvarado's promise to create a parity cabinet is portrayed as appeasing women, rather than recognizing their merit. These frames subtly question the legitimacy of parity and the women elected beneath its rules, a common strategy of quota resistance (Krook, 2016). Such resistance does not reach the level of backlash, but does suggest that women's political presence—and especially their *right* to be present—is not yet normalized in Costa Rica.

V Can Women Save Democracy?

In 1991, when feminist activists and party members campaigned for Argentina's quota law, they used the slogan, "With few women in politics, women change; with many women in politics, politics changes" (Marx, Borner, and Caminotti, 2007). This slogan goes beyond justice-based arguments for women's political inclusion, which hold that guaranteeing women's political participation and representation is a matter of equal rights, and towards substance-based arguments, which hold that states must include women because their presence transforms policy. Substance-based arguments saturate the international development field. Nearly every governmental or non-governmental organization working on women and gender, from the United Nations to the National Democratic Institute, argues that women's political empowerment improves human rights and wellbeing. The notion that increasing women's political participation and representation will transform politics-as-usual is so pervasive that Valdini (2019) calls it "the if/then mythology": *if* only more women enter politics, *then* progress would happen.

Political actors believe this mythology as well. Latin American voters support women candidates when trust in government is low (Morgan and Buice, 2013). They believe women are more honest and less corrupt (Fernández Poncela, 2014, p.69; Smith et. al., 2017; Wylie, 2018, p.17). Even after controlling for gender quota requirements, Latin American political parties nominate greater proportions of women as trust falls and as perceptions of corruption rise (Funk,

Hinojosa, and Piscopo, 2019). Crisis can also motivate women to increase their own political engagement, as evidenced by *Mujeres en Acción* in Costa Rica and the revitalization of women's and feminist movements across the globe.

Crisis also motivates greater proportions of women to run for office. For instance, in the United States following the 2016 election of Donald Trump, an unprecedented number of left-wing women contested and won elected office at the federal and state levels. They ran because they perceived U.S. democracy to be under siege (Dittmar, 2020). Similarly, a record number of Brazilian women, including Afro-descendant women, stood as candidates in the 2018 elections (Wylie, 2020). Women on the left were outraged by the 2015 impeachment of Dilma Rousseff and the 2018 assassination of Marielle Franco, a Black, gay councilwoman from Rio de Janeiro. Rousseff's impeachment and Franco's murder became emblematic of Brazil's backlash against progressive politics, and left-wing women mobilized in response. Given the prevalence of gender stereotypes that associate women with renewal and change, and given that women themselves will come forward to defend their rights, women might benefit from Latin America's crisis of democracy and right turn.

Yet, a vast body of scholarship analyzing women's legislative behavior cautions against treating substance-based arguments as empirical truths. Women may have different policy preferences and govern differently overall, but changing politics and policy requires overcoming institutional constraints (Barnes, 2016; Piscopo and O'Brien, 2019). Progress depends not just on lawmakers, but on public opinion, party preferences, chief executives, and courts. Women do have significant resources at their disposal, from feminist organizing in civil society to spaces within legislatures, such as caucuses and commissions, which facilitate cross-party alliances. Even so, passing new laws and reorienting public values is a difficult and lengthy process and, as contemporary events reveal, highly susceptible to backlash and even reversion.

The "if/then mythology" of women's political participation and representation thus has some serious pitfalls. When women cannot boost parties' approval ratings or cannot prevent the rollback of human rights protections, their "failures" may reinforce a different gender stereotype: that women are not up to the job. Women who support right-wing platforms may become particular targets of this attack. Disillusionment with the results of women's increased presence could stall or reverse progress towards gender parity in women's representation. Arguments that women's political presence makes no difference could deepen the already-unfolding backlash against equal rights. With the forces deployed against liberal democracy appearing more robust than ever, expecting or demanding that women alone can fix breaking or broken systems is unrealistic and unjust. Citizens must demand ethical behavior, security and prosperity, responsive government, and equal treatment from all their elected representatives, men and women alike.

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