From 30 Percent to Gender Parity in Everything:
The Steady Route to Raising Women’s Political Representation in Mexico

Jennifer M. Piscopo
Associate Professor of Politics
Occidental College
1600 Campus Road
Los Angeles, CA 90041
USA
piscopo@oxy.edu
ORCID 0000-0002-9043-1810

Lorena Vázquez Correa
PhD candidate in political science
National Autonomous University of Mexico (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México)
Avenida universidad 1900, ed. 40, depto. 3,
Colonia U.H. Altilllo-Universidad
Coyoacán, Ciudad de México, C.P. 04318
Mexico
lorenavazco@yahoo.com
ORCID 0000-0003-3692-0880

Abstract

This paper assesses 30 years of gender quota adoption and reform in Latin America through the lens of earlier theorizing about the incremental and fast tracks. Focusing on women political actors’ ongoing efforts to transform weak quota laws into comprehensive parity requirements, we argue that most fast-track countries follow a steady route. The steady route builds on Dahlreup and Freidenvall’s landmark conceptualization of the fast track, elevating countries’ reliance on iterative quota reforms and demonstrating how innovation in quota design continuously raises the bar for what constitutes a “good” quota or parity law. We demonstrate this route using a case study from Mexico, focusing on the 2014 adoption of gender parity for the federal and state legislatures and the 2019 adoption of parity for the executive, legislative, and judicial branches.

Keywords: women, political representation, gender quotas, Mexico, Latin America

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2021 marked 30 years of gender quota laws in Latin America. In 1991, Argentina adopted the contemporary era’s first statutory gender quota for women candidates, when women held less than ten percent of seats in the region’s legislatures (Schwindt-Bayer and Alles 2018). Today, after dozens of reforms, most Latin American countries implement numerically effective quotas and ten countries even have gender parity—understood as gender balance or 50-50 representation. Argentina moved first, but Mexico’s journey especially stands out: from a 1993 recommendation that parties consider nominating 30 percent women, the country adopted a 2019 constitutional reform mandating “parity in everything.” All elected and appointed positions at the federal, state, and municipal levels must be distributed evenly between men and women. Taken together, the adoption and reform of gender quotas has raised Latin American women’s descriptive representation: women held 30 percent of seats in the region’s lower or unicameral houses and 28 percent in the senates in 2021.¹ In Mexico, women’s presence climbed from 15 percent in 1994 (Freidenberg and Alva Huitrón 2017, 19) to 50 percent in 2021 (IPU 2021).

A robust literature has sought to explain why countries adopt quota policies, focusing on factors like democratization, international norm diffusion, women’s movements, and male elites’ strategic behavior (Bush 2011; Fallon, Swiss, and Viterna 2012; Krook 2009; Towns 2012; Valdini 2019; Weeks 2018). Theorizing also focuses on how countries understand the problem of women’s political underrepresentation in the first place. Centrally, a landmark paper by Drude Dahlerup and Lenita Freidenvall (2005) distinguished between countries who believe that equality happens eventually and therefore rely on voluntary measures—like targeted recruitment efforts—versus countries that opt for state intervention—like statutory quotas. Countries on the former route choose the incremental track, while those on latter route choose the fast track.
Drawing data from 30 years of quotas’ adoption and reform, we ask: *does the notion of fast and incremental tracks still explain policy outcomes?* Dahlerup and Freidenvall were correct to note that fast-track countries choose mandatory quotas in order to rapidly raise women’s descriptive representation, but their piece was published in 2005, during an earlier stage of quotas’ development. The initial quota laws that launched countries on the fast track did not always yield the anticipated gains in descriptive representation. These gains came later—often years later—as women’s political networks secured reforms that strengthened quotas’ application to national legislatures and expanded quotas’ reach to other levels and branches of governments. The ensuing decades have underscored the central importance of quota reform, though most theoretical and empirical work remains focused on quotas’ initial adoption (Hughes et al 2019, 223).

In this paper, we use Latin America’s iterative process of quota reform to expand Dahlerup and Freidenvall’s notion of the fast track. Their distinction between legal mandates (fast) and “natural” progress (incremental) remains essential for separating quota-adopters from non-adopters. To their concept of the fast-track we add the existence of a steady route—that is, countries who opt-for statutory change but nonetheless take years to design and implement numerically effective measures. The steady route illuminates how choosing the fast track merely begins countries’ quota journey; adds precision by elevating countries’ reliance on iterative quota reforms; and demonstrates how innovation continuously raises the bar for what constitutes a “good” quota law.

The steady route unfolds as quota proponents—who are mostly elite women in political parties allied with feminists in the state and civil society—slowly win changes that close loopholes in earlier versions of the law. Each reform habituates elites to affirmative action but
also identifies new barriers in women’s access to political power: men party leaders continued to support and vote for quota reforms in public while minimizing their compliance in practice. Women’s networks combat party leaders’ resistance by pushing for ever-stronger quota laws, ones that would raise quotas’ numerical effectiveness by foreclosing upon party leaders’ most recent evasion. This process occurs as political actors transfer ideas about policy design across terrains (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996). In the case of quotas, actors pilot and then share ways to make quota laws progressively stronger.

To illuminate the steady route, we process trace quota reform in Latin America generally and Mexico specifically. We draw on official documents (laws and policies), 27 interviews with quota proponents, and advocates’ statements in public events. After conceptualizing the steady route, we trace Latin American quota laws’ evolution from 1991 to today. Other scholars have offered similar accounts (Hinojosa and Piscopo 2013; Piscopo 2015; Schwindt-Bayer 2018), but advances continue to outpace scholarship: these changes themselves demonstrate how the steady route yields continuous innovation in quota design. We focus on recent, key developments: the ever-increasing number of Latin American countries adopting gender parity, the emphasis on vertical and horizontal parity, and the application of quotas and now parity to subnational elections and other government branches. We then examine these developments in the Mexican case, focusing on two moments: (1) the 2014 adoption of gender parity for the federal and state Congresses, which led to parity for municipal governments and (2) the 2019 adoption of parity in everything, which also shifted policy goals from parity among candidates to parity in electoral results.

We conclude by highlighting how the steady route offers an optimistic account of quota evolution. The steady route emerges inductively from the Latin American cases but is not
exclusive to the region. Across the globe, quota reforms have been critical for combatting elite resistance, making quotas stronger, and ultimately realizing concrete gains in women’s descriptive representation.

EXPLAINING QUOTA ADOPTION AND EVOLUTION

For many scholars, the adoption of statutory gender quotas poses a significant puzzle. Men traditionally hold most political offices and therefore make most decisions. Statutory gender quotas—meaning legal or constitutional measures requiring the selection or election of certain proportions of women—entail displacing men for women. Why would male elites vote for their own displacement?

Different scholars have offered different explanations, though their identified causes often interact. First, democratization and regime change provide proponents with windows of opportunity (Bauer 2008; Htun and Jones 2002; Kang and Tripp 2018; Krook 2009; Towns 2012). In Latin America for instance, women (and some men) persuaded opponents that gender quotas would signal their countries’ democratic and modern credentials (Baldez 2004; Piscopo 2016b; Towns 2012). Similarly, women in Europe deployed arguments about correcting democratic deficits, generating momentum for quota adoption throughout western, central, and eastern Europe (Lépinard and Rubio-Marín 2018). In some cases, arguments about democracy came from above, with international organizations pressuring post-conflict countries into adopting gender quotas, as in Afghanistan (Larson 2012).

Top-down instances notwithstanding, women leverage the rhetorical power of democratic norms—and actual moments of democratization—to pressure men elites into compliance.
Women’s mobilization within parties and through cross-party networks has been critical (Palma and Cerva 2014). In fact, women’s victories are so extensive that parties can longer be considered the primary agents driving electoral reform (Celis, Krook, and Meier 2011, 256). Moreover, women party members, politicians, and activists cooperate internationally as well as domestically: women meet regularly in regional and international forums, from formal conferences and meetings sponsored by international organizations to grassroots feminist encounters (Fernández Anderson 2020). At these meetings, attendees exchange ideas relative to quota design (Hughes, Krook, and Paxton 2015).

Second, party elites—who remain mostly men—must see a material and not just normative advantage in adopting gender quotas (Gatto 2016; Valdini 2019; Weeks 2018). Voluntary party quotas often diffused from left parties to center or center-right parties, thanks to inter-party competition (Bruhn 2003; Meier 2004; Murray, Krook, and Opello 2012; Verge 2012). Left parties face incentives to make quotas mandatory, since doing so imposes quotas’ displacement costs on all parties equally (Murray, Krook, and Opello 2012; Weeks 2018). Right-wing women may also come to recognize that statutory quotas benefit their careers, leading them to break with their party and join pro-quota coalitions (Baldez 2004; Piscopo 2016b). Diffusion across parties, support from right-wing women, and cross-party pressure all tip the scales towards adopting statutory quotas. Alternatively or perhaps additionally, chief executives might support gender quotas to direct attention away from their own misdeeds, adopting quotas amidst corruption scandals or while curbing other civil or political liberties (Valdini 2019).

Looking at what kind of quotas are adopted also provides insight into this puzzle. In Latin America especially but not exclusively, initial statutory gender quotas were very weak (Htun and Jones 2002). They contained various loopholes designed to mitigate their effectiveness, meaning
elites could reap all the rhetorical benefits while paying few of the concrete costs (Hinojosa and Piscopo 2013; Htun and Jones 2002; Krook 2009; Murray, Krook, and Opello 2012). Yet once weak quotas were adopted, they could be strengthened, as women became increasingly frustrated with their relegation to the lower list positions and the losing districts (Piscopo 2016b). Across the globe, women have insisted on stronger measures: 44 percent of all quota-adopting countries reformed their initial quotas at least once by 2015 and reforms constituted the bulk of quota changes in most years from 2003 onward (Hughes et al. 2019, 226-227). Despite such revisions, “cross-national research has largely ignored quota reforms” (Hughes et al. 2019, 223).

**ACTORS, THE STATE, AND THE FAST TRACK**

Other scholars have considered whether and how gender quotas fit some citizenship models better than others (Krook, Lovenduski, and Squires 2009). For many European countries, gender quotas constitute a new vision of democratic citizenship, one where women’s equal participation is a precondition of democratic legitimacy (Lépinard and Rubio-Marín 2018, 444-445). Latin America’s quota proponents today speak about “substantive equality between women and men” and “parity democracy” (Palma 2021; Piscopo 2015). Further, many see gender parity as more than a 50 percent gender quota: technically, the measures operate the same (in that parties must nominate the appropriate proportion of women), but conceptually, advocates frame quotas as temporary special measures designed to help women catch-up to men, whereas parity constitutes a permanent expression of democracy (Dahlerup 2021; Palma 2021; Piscopo 2016a). These arguments all connect gender quotas (or gender parity) to equality and democracy.
These meanings are all crafted and presented by women political actors, who share certain premises. Namely, quota proponents see women as an identity group that has experienced systematic discrimination, and hold that equality of results is needed to overcome the deficits of equality of opportunity. The state becomes the actor best positioned to guarantee such results. In a pathbreaking article published in 2005, fifteen years after Argentina adopted the contemporary era’s first statutory quota law, Drude Dahlerup and Lenita Freidenvall (2005) identified how these premises influence countries’ likelihood to adopt gender quotas. Those countries rejecting state intervention take the incremental track to women’s political representation, refusing quotas; those accepting arguments about using state power to end gender inequality take the fast track, adopting quotas.

As Dahlerup and Freidenvall explain, incremental-track countries—like Denmark and Sweden—remain reluctant to frame women as a distinct identity group whose systematic exclusion merits affirmative action. Instead, they favor explanations that frame women’s political underrepresentation in terms of unequal opportunity, believing that women’s numbers will rise as barriers fall (as more women enter the labor force, for instance). They contend that gender equality in political representation happens in “due course” (Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2005, 29). Consequently, gender quotas—which give women preferential treatment relative to men—are not seen as necessary (Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2005, 30).

By contrast, fast-track countries are unwilling to wait decades for gradual improvements in women’s numerical representation. In recognizing that equality of opportunity does not end discrimination, countries become willing to implement affirmative measures—like gender quotas—that will boost women’s descriptive representation more rapidly. For fast-track countries, quotas target the real source of the problem: the political parties. After all, the
reasoning goes, women’s professional qualifications have improved, but party elites are still not choosing women (Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2005, 30).

Dahlerup and Freidenvall’s tracks are stylized, of course. “Incremental” versus “fast” captures how activists and policymakers frame their countries’ diagnosis of and solution to the problem of women’s underrepresentation. The distinction does not describe countries’ actual achievements. Take Brazil, a fast-track country: Brazil adopted a 25 percent gender quota in 1997 and raised the threshold to 30 percent in 2000, but women’s representation in the lower house remains at 15.2 percent (IPU 2021).2 The notion of time conveyed by “incremental” versus “fast” captures a pathway to progress, not a precise interval of months or years in which gains to women’s descriptive representation happen. Yet for fast-track countries, time matters in one literal sense: initially-weak quota laws needed time to be implemented, have their initial deficiencies diagnosed by women politicians and activists, and then be strengthened. Dahlerup and Freidevall acknowledge this point (2005), but their conceptualization of the incremental and fast tracks hinges on the decision (or not) to adopt quotas, while remaining agnostic about the process through which quotas become effective.

Yet the past 15 years of quotas’ development suggests that quota reform merits theorizing in its own right. Some countries did make immediate gains in descriptive representation following their first quota adoption (e.g., Afghanistan [Larson 2012]), but iteration and improvement reflects the more typical experience in Latin America and the globe. We therefore update Dahlerup and Freidenvall’s notion of the fast track by introducing a steady route along this track. Countries on the steady route make multiple quota reforms, revising and updating the mechanisms through which quotas and later gender parity are applied. This iteration and improvement not only strengthens the original legislative quota, but extends the quota to
different branches and levels of government. This process unfolds gradually, not because quotas are considered normatively unacceptable (as characterizes the incremental track), but because revising statutes to make them effective takes time.

Most centrally, the steady route calls attention to how women political actors continuously reimagine quota laws. Women benefit from initial quota laws, however weak, and then become key players in articulating and transferring ideas about how to make quota laws stronger (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996, 2012). Transference refers to “the process where the knowledge about policy, legal or administrative dispositions, in a moment or place, are used in the development of policies and dispositions, legal or administrative in another place and time” (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996, 334). Women pressure for quota reforms on multiple fronts—within parties, within Congress, and before electoral management bodies—and on multiple levels of government. The objectives also shift over time, as women keep moving the goalpost: first they focus on candidate quotas but then, once compliance is largely secured, they shift to achieving gender balance in electoral results.

We illustrate this process below, by tracing quota reforms in Latin America generally and Mexico specifically. For the Mexican case, we combine data from official records with data from qualitative interviews. Author 1 conducted 27 in-person interviews with current and former women legislators, feminist activists, and electoral officials during fieldwork in December 2013, March 2014, and May 2015. Interviews focused on how networks of women political elites and their allies incorporated gender parity into Mexico’s 2013-2014 constitutional and electoral reforms. Interviewees spoke under conditions of anonymity and are identified using a number, the date, and a brief description of the subject’s position at the time. For Mexico’s 2019 parity in
everything reform, we rely on the congressional record, actors’ public statements, and Author 2’s experience as a Mexican researcher-scholar monitoring and supporting this reform.

LATIN AMERICA AND THE STEADY ROUTE

Understanding quota evolution requires understanding the key measures necessary to make quotas numerically effective. These design features have been widely identified in the literature (e.g., Dahlerup 2021; Hinojosa and Piscopo 2013; Hughes et al. 2019; Schwindt-Bayer 2009), but not always traced systematically over time. Revisions largely fall into three categories. First, quota thresholds have risen steadily, with actors now advocating for gender parity as a distinctive and permanent expression of gender equality and democracy. Second, placement mandates direct political parties to not simply nominate women but to place women in list positions or districts where they have realistic chances of winning. Placement mandates initially addressed the vertical composition of the list, meaning the rank-ordering of women in electable positions down the list. For gender parity, vertical parity has meant alternating men’s and women’s names. Third, enforcement sanctions parties for failing to nominate the required number of women.

Table 1 shows how these innovations in quota design unfolded in Latin America. For each country, the table lists the current quota, the year the quota law was first adopted, the number of significant constitutional, legislative, or administrative reforms, and the nature of each reform. Most requirements are constitutional or statutory. However, we include certain cases where congresses proved recalcitrant and women worked with electoral agencies to secure
administrative changes that boosted the quota laws’ effectiveness, like by installing placement mandates (Gatto 2017; Piscopo 2016b).

[TABLE 1 HERE]

The first major takeaway is that Latin American countries nearly universally raised their quota thresholds over time. Twelve Latin American countries adopted their first gender quotas in the 1990s, setting thresholds at 20, 30, or 40 percent. Currently, sixteen of eighteen countries implement some form of statutory gender quota, with ten countries now at gender parity. Further, parity evolved from a lower threshold in all cases save Nicaragua. Gender parity also has led actors to insist on vertical and horizontal parity: as parties minimally complied with rank-orderings, such as always naming men to the first position and women to the second, reforms have mandated the alternation of men and women in the number one spot across the parties’ electoral lists (Freidenberg and Lajas García 2015; Tula 2021). Costa Rica, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Mexico all have adopted horizontal parity in the last four years. To our knowledge, Latin America is the first global region to introduce this element of quota design.

The second takeaway is the overall predominance of quota evolution via repeated reform. By our count, the eighteen Latin American countries reformed their quota laws 34 times. Twelve countries reformed their initial quota law at least once and the modal number of reforms is three. Further, only in two instances did reforms weaken quota laws: high courts in Colombia and Venezuela ruled their statutory quotas unconstitutional, but a subsequent constitutional reform in Colombia allowed the quota’s re-adoption (Piscopo 2015). The similarity of reforms despite countries’ differing electoral systems further reflects how ideas cross borders while adapting to
specific contexts. For instance, countries with closed-list systems more readily adopt placement mandates, but the notion of placing women in more prominent list positions also has influenced countries with open-list systems. Chile—which uses open-lists—introduced a one-off rule for the constitutional assembly elections that all lists were to be headed by women, with vertical parity thereafter.

The overall trend in Latin America is therefore quota adoption followed by iterative reforms that strengthen quotas’ implementation. Reforms also have expanded quotas’ application to other government branches and to subnational governments, as illustrated by Table A1 (Appendix A). Twelve countries have extended their quota laws to regional and/or municipal elections. Four countries also apply gender parity to the chief and secondary executive positions, usually elected on a single party ticket. Peru requires gender parity among president/vice-president and governor/vice-governor candidate pairings, and Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, and Honduras apply gender parity to mayor/vice-mayor candidate pairings. Two countries—Ecuador and Mexico—require parity for all elected and appointed executive posts. Three countries—Bolivia, Ecuador, and Mexico—apply gender parity to the judicial branch. With the exception of Nicaragua, parity requirements for the subnational level and the extension of gender quotas or parity to the executive and/or judicial branches came after the countries’ initial quota law. These reforms again underscore the importance of the steady route.

MEXICO BEGINS ITS FAST-TRACK JOURNEY

The Mexican case demonstrates how women political elites steadily pushed quota reforms forward. Women within and across political parties connected with feminist civil society
actors, including journalists, academics, and lawyers, to push quota revisions at the national and subnational levels. They used different arenas to generate innovations in quota design, ideas which could later be transferred from one context to the other, all the while making quotas more effective (Cerna and Palma 2014; Piscopo 2016b).

Like most Latin American countries, quotas’ initial adoption occurred alongside democratization. Beginning in the 1980s, Mexico began a series of electoral reforms that eroded the dominance of the one-time hegemonic Party of the Institutional Revolution (PRI, by its Spanish acronym). Opposition parties gained ground in state and federal legislatures during the 1980s and 1990s, forcing a succession of electoral reforms that gradually opened the political system. Mexico passed seven electoral reforms between 1987 and 2008 (Magaloni 2005; Hinojosa 2008), and more followed in the 2010s.

This reform-oriented mood extended to other policy questions. Women in political parties and civil society began meeting in conferences to articulate their demands, as in the 1988 Forum for Women and Democracy in Mexico, the 1991 Convention of Women for Democracy, the 1996 Assembly of Women for the Democratic Transition, the 1998 Women’s Parliament (subsequently held annually until 2006) and the 2000 National Congress of Women Towards the Reform of the State (Tarrés 2006; Girón et al. 2008). The events’ action items addressed multiple policy areas, from employment to violence against women—and especially political participation. As a feminist leader who coordinated the women’s parliaments reflected, increasing women’s political representation is the policy area where women have consensus, given how it benefits women across the ideological spectrum (Interview 4, December 17, 2013). Other interviewees echoed this sentiment: that gender quotas are the one issue uniting women
across the political parties (Interview 8, March 13, 2014; Interview 17, May 7, 2015; Interview 19, May 7, 2015; Interview 23, May 11, 2015).

In the 1993 electoral reform, women secured the inclusion of a recommendation that parties nominate 30 percent women. Women maintained the pressure: in the 2002 electoral reform, this recommendation was raised to 30 percent and then to 40 percent in the 2008 reform. Yet each victory preserved certain loopholes. Mexico elects its 128-member Senate using electoral lists at the state and federal level (with different formulas at each level) and its 500-member lower house using 300 single-member districts and 200 closed-list proportional representation seats. The 30-percent quota rule included a rank-order requirement for chamber and senate lists, but parties frequently placed women in the lowest possible slot (Interview 19, May 7, 2015). More centrally, parties took advantage of a loophole that exempted single-member districts from the quota if parties chose candidates via a direct vote inside the party. In practice, parties just told election authorities that candidates were chosen in intra-party primaries and electoral authorities accepted their word (Baldez, 2004, 251; Freidenberg and Alva Huitrón 2017; Piscopo 2016b). Parties also exploited Mexico’s unique system of pairing each candidate with an alternate, assigning men alternates to women candidates so that elected women could resign and be replaced by men (Palma and Cerva 2014).

Frustrated with these shenanigans, women organized as Mujeres en Plural (Women as Multiple) brought a court case to Mexico’s federal electoral court in 2011. (The electoral court system operates independently of other court systems, and the federal chamber—TEPJF, by its Spanish acronym—has final say in matters of election law.) The TEPJF delivered a landmark ruling that the gender quota law must be applied “without exception,” thus striking mixed-sex
candidate pairings as well as the internal-vote loophole (TEPJF 2011). A 40-percent gender quota with far less wiggle room would set the ground for Mexico’s adoption of gender parity.

FROM A 30 PERCENT GENDER QUOTA TO GENDER PARITY

Gender quotas’ evolution at the federal level—the passage of initially weak reforms, parties’ evasion, and women’s advocacy to close loopholes—also occurred at the state level (Caminotti and Freidenberg 2016; Freidenberg and Alva Huitrón 2017). Per the constitution, state legislatures are unicameral bodies elected using proportional representation and single-member districts. Mexican states adopted gender quotas starting in the 1990s, often with innovations not yet seen at the federal level. For instance, two states adopted mandatory, statutory gender quotas in the mid-1990s, well before the mandatory, statutory federal quota. In the twenty years between 1993 and 2013 (between the federal 30 percent recommendation and the 2014 federal mandate for gender parity in state legislatures), Mexico’s 32 states reformed their mandatory, statutory quota laws 70 times (calculated based on Freidenberg and Alva Huitrón 2017, 16-17). Ten states even adopted gender parity before the federal requirement to do so (Atenea 2017, 43).

Developments in the states and at the TEPJF therefore primed gender parity as Mexico began its 2013-2014 constitutional reform process. In fact, several women senators from Mujeres en Plural enjoyed close ties with then-President Enrique Peña Nieto, ensuring that the draft constitutional reforms Peña Nieto sent to Congress in October 2013 included gender parity (Interview 17, May 7, 2015). Peña Nieto’s support foreclosed upon open opposition, as men elites—even those of rival parties—did not wish to contradict the president (Interview 14, May
6, 2015; Interview 15, May 6, 2015). Instead, wrangling occurred over subtle yet significant differences in wording: would the constitution say that political parties should “strive for” parity or “guarantee” parity? Women senators waged a fierce and ultimately successful battle for the more binding language of guarantee (Interview 23, May 11, 2015).

The revised constitution, approved in February 2014, required that parties guarantee gender parity for the federal and state legislatures, thereby ending the patchwork of state-level quota laws. Yet the constitution did not have the final word. The exact mechanisms would need spelling out in secondary laws that updated electoral rules. Each Mexican state also needed to bring their constitution and election laws in line with the federal constitution, a process known as harmonization. These next steps created opportunities for yet more innovation.

2014 federal electoral reform

Women legislators wanted the secondary laws to resolve any remaining ambiguity about how women candidates would be selected (Interview 15, May 6, 2015). As a congresswoman explained, the constitution guaranteed parity among candidates but did not explain “how far parties needed to go” to achieve this objective (Interview 19, May 8, 2015). For the electoral lists, including vertical parity in the new electoral code proved straightforward, since states with gender parity already required alternating men’s and women’s names down the lists. The debate instead centered on the 300 single-member house districts.

Leaders of Mexico’s electoral institute (INE, by its Spanish acronym) and women from right, center, and left parties wanted to end parties’ longstanding practice of concentrating women candidates in the losing districts. They proposed a “three-tier rule”: parties would use
previous election results to divide districts into safe, competitive, and losing tiers, respecting gender parity within each tier (Interview 17, May 7, 2015). Except the men party leaders balked. A woman senator recalled, “the paragraphs [we wrote] kept disappearing from the draft law” (Interview 18, May 7, 2015). A Mujeres en Plural member explained that while the party leaders supported gender parity publicly, they privately scoffed and belittled the women senators, saying, “What more do you women want?” (Interview 17, May 7, 2015). In the end, women settled for a weaker provision: the new political parties’ law said parties could not “exclusively” concentrate women in losing districts.

This cycle of progress and resistance captures how countries move along the steady route. As a congresswoman reflected, “Gender parity emerged from all the years that came before” (Interview 15, May 6, 2015). Ideas about quotas’ design moved across institutions and between levels of government, and this process continued even as male party leaders’ open opposition became muted. The exclusively criterion thus became yet one more step along the steady route: when the three-tier rule failed in congress, actors transferred the idea back to INE.

INE leaders knew that, so long as parties nominated at least one woman to a winning single-member district, then parties would be in compliance with the exclusively provision according to the letter—though not the spirit—of the law (Interview 12, May 4, 2015). To prevent this minimum compliance, women authorities in INE suggested that the three-tier rule could still serve an evaluative function: parties couldn’t be prohibited from placing higher proportions of women in losing districts, but they could be embarrassed. Women INE leaders waged a year-long campaign to persuade their male colleagues that, starting with the 2015 elections, INE would publicize how parties distributed nominations across the tiers (Interview 12, May 4, 2015; Interview 22, May 8, 2015). The INE leadership finally agreed, and parties
paid attention: to avoid shaming, parties’ 2015 candidate nominations largely followed the three-tier rule (Interview 12, May 4, 2015; Interview 22, May 8, 2015). As an INE woman leader reflected, “Electoral administration can advance in ways that laws cannot” (Interview 22, May 8, 2015). Likewise, an INE staffer highlighted the role of continuous improvement to quotas’ design, explaining that “the rules are getting better all the time, to end the parties’ evasions” (Interview 24, May 12, 2015).

**Harmonization and horizontal parity**

Innovations around gender parity moved vertically as well. As states began harmonizing their constitutions and electoral codes, Mujeres en Plural reached out to state legislators, searching for allies who would push state laws even further (Interview 23, May 11, 2015). Namely, Mexican states can regulate municipal elections, and Mujeres en Plural saw an opportunity for revised state laws to include the municipalities. Of course, the idea of gender parity for municipal elections was not new: Peña Nieto himself initially wanted the constitutional reform to include gender parity for local elections, but his draft ultimately sacrificed the municipalities to keep party leaders on board (Interview 17, May 7, 2015). The harmonization process put municipal elections back into play. Some states did answer the call, rewriting their constitutions and election laws so that vertical parity applied to the state legislatures and municipal governments, leading to a new subnational patchwork where some Mexican states introduced quota innovations not yet seen at the federal level (Piscopo 2017).

The implementation of gender parity in the municipalities then led to horizontal parity, due to Mexico’s distinctive municipal election system (TEPJF 2015). Parties present a single
ticket for municipal offices, so vertical parity would mean alternation down a list of executive and legislative positions. Yet if parties minimally complied with vertical parity—that is, always placing a man as the list-header—then women would never compete for the first position, that of mayor. Women initiated suits before the electoral courts in various states, gradually winning victories at the TEPJF, which required municipal lists to respect vertical and horizontal parity (Piscopo 2017). For the municipal races in each state, parties would need to distribute list-header positions evenly between men and women, effectively introducing gender parity for mayors.

The idea of horizontal parity then moved from municipal lists to state and federal legislative lists. Again, the initiative came from women leaders in INE: based on developments in the states, they contended that the agency’s regulations for the 2018 federal elections should include horizontal parity for the senate’s and chamber’s proportional representation lists (INE 2017). Various political parties on the left and right protested these regulations before Mexico’s electoral court, but the TEPJF ultimately sided with INE (TEPJF 2017).

Horizontal parity achieved a deeper level of precision than anticipated by the constitution or the secondary laws, again exemplifying the steady route’s characteristics of iteration and innovation. INE determined that horizontal parity required parties to alternate the first list position between men and women across their lists for the chamber and the Senate, and that a woman head each party’s single, federal list for Senate (followed by vertical parity thereafter). With these rules in place for the 2018 elections, Mexico achieved a gender parity legislature twenty-five years after the 1993 recommendation that 30 percent of parties’ candidates be women. Women comprised 48.2 percent of women in the lower house and 49.2 percent of women in the Senate in the 2018-2021 congress (IPU 2021).
GENDER PARITY IN EVERYTHING

Yet Mexican women were not content to let parity rest with the legislative branch. “Each legislature needs to pass the baton to advance another stage,” explained a former congresswoman. “When we [women] are no longer in the right positions, we know that others are, and the women after us will look for ways to advance” (Interview 21, May 8, 2015). Her words capture how multiple generations of women have moved Mexico along the steady route, all the while raising the bar for what constitutes a “good” quota law. In Mexico, this progression culminated with parity in everything: gender balance in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, the autonomous Indigenous communities, and party leadership.

Parity in everything required a constitutional change but again, the idea was primed by earlier reforms. Just as some states’ adoption of gender parity for the state legislatures helped prepare political elites for gender parity in the federal congress, horizontal parity for the municipal governments introduced the idea of gender parity in the executive branch. Parties already needed to practice gender parity when nominating mayors, municipal counselors, and federal and state legislators. By 2019, the only elected offices untouched by gender parity were the governor offices—perhaps the most prized political positions in the country, due to their high profile, access to resources, and ability to groom candidates for presidential bids.

Women senators working on the parity in everything bill therefore wanted to mention governorships specifically, but party leaders would not agree. Ultimately, dropping the governorships allowed parity in everything to advance (echoing how Peña Nieto dropped the municipal elections so parity in the federal and state legislatures could advance). Conservative Senator Xóchitl Gálvez Ruiz recounted, “Truly, we had pushed our work to the limit,” echoing
her colleague’s reflection about every generation of women advancing slightly further. Yet in this instance, she concluded that, “The interior life of the parties is complicated, and the men did not want it [parity in the governorships], they did not want it because every man in the Senate thinks he’ll be a candidate for governor and obviously this would take away their chance” (Inmujeres 2021).

Recognizing this limit, another right-party senator, Kenia López Rabadán, introduced the first initiative for parity in everything (less the governorships). López Rabadán later used time on the Senate floor to insist that committees evaluate the proposal (Diario de los debates 2018, 145). Thanks to her and other women’s efforts to draw attention, every party group decided to claim credit by crafting their own proposal (Gaceta del Senado 2019). All advanced to the floor, allowing all parties to share credit for advancing Mexico this far. When later conflicts over the agenda erupted and the scheduled plenary debate got bumped (Diario de los debates 2019, 1109-1110), Mujeres en Plural, the civil society group 50 + 1, and women senators from different parties held a press conference. López-Rabadán took the microphone, insisting that gender parity, “does not have parties, it does not have party labels, what it has is priority and the constitutional reform for gender parity must happen” (SenadoresPANTV 2019). Consequently, women senators secured an agreement that moved the gender parity debate to a special legislative session in June 2019, during which parity in everything received unanimous approval in the house and the senate. The new constitution text requires horizontal and vertical parity “in all elected positions” as well as parity in the following spheres: the appointed positions of the judicial branch and the executive branch, including independent government agencies; municipalities governed by Indigenous customary law; and political parties’ leadership structures.
“All elected positions” implied the governorships, but party leaders clearly viewed that failure to enumerate them constituted the loophole they need. When the 2021 elections arrived, congresswomen reported being pressured by men party leaders to remain quiet about the governor races (Inmujeres 2021). Several congressional leaders (all men) introduced legislation that would exempt the governorships from parity in everything (Inmujeres 2021). Again, women INE leaders stepped in where legal reform failed, including parity in the governors’ races in INE’s regulations for the 2021 elections. Again, the parties resisted, contesting the rules before the electoral court, and again the TEPJF sided with INE and the women. The TEPJF determined that each party had to nominate at least seven women in the fifteen races (TEPJF 2020). In the end, women won six races, the largest number of women governors ever elected in Mexico.

Finally, another important innovation happened in the 2021 congressional races, where INE and TEPJF together transformed gender parity in candidates into gender parity of results. Women had comprised 51 percent of the lower-house candidates but won only 49.6 percent of the seats. Even before the election, women leaders from INE had attempted to interpret gender parity in everything as related to results, but the institute’s plenary body disagreed (TEPJF 2021, 39). Nonetheless, weeks after the election results, the TEPJF modified the assignment of seats resulting from the proportional representation races, giving women two additional seats—enough for women to occupy exactly half of Mexico’s lower house. Advocacy by women political actors and strategic partnerships with electoral authorities again shifted the goalpost: Mexico moved from gender parity among candidates to gender parity in electoral results, a new interpretation of parity.

THE STEADY ROUTE TOWARDS PARITY DEMOCRACY
Three decades of quota reform in Latin America have transformed women’s access to political power. In Mexico as in the region, gender parity has become the norm—and not just among candidates, but among the officeholders themselves. Given how much women in the 1990s struggled “just” to win 30 percent quotas, the changes are perhaps even more dramatic than anything activists and academics anticipated when Dahlerup and Freidenvall wrote their hallmark piece in 2005.

The centrality of quota reform led us to revisit Dahlerup and Freidenvall’s notion of the fast track and to conceptualize how many fast-track countries actually embark on a steady route. As a modal pathway within the fast track, the steady route draws theoretical and empirical attention to quota reform, the iterative processes often overlooked by scholars still largely focused on explaining the puzzle of quota adoption itself. The steady route draws attention to how women political actors take weak quota laws and make them stronger, continuously raising the bar for what makes a “good” quota—and now parity—law. Some countries do still lack gender quotas, but once they enter the fast track, progress largely depends on steady iterations and improvements to quotas’ design. Our characterization of this experience emerges from, but is not limited to, Latin America. Iteration and innovation have characterized the fast track in countries as diverse as Armenia, Belgium, and Jordan. In Africa as well, the norm is becoming quota strengthening over successive waves of reform (Bauer 2021, 338).

For such steady-route countries, what happens after parity in everything? On the one hand, if the fast-track aims to improve women’s descriptive representation, then parity in everything brings the fast track to a close. On the other hand, if the fast track is conceived more broadly, as countries’ adoption of any legal measures that level the electoral playing field, then
other iterations and improvements remain. In Latin America, Mexico again takes the lead. In the 2021 elections, several states adopted electoral quotas for Indigenous peoples, Afro-Mexicans, people with disabilities, and LGBTQIA+ people, applying gender parity within each target group. A new federal law protects candidates from political violence for reasons of gender and new INE rules prevent parties from running candidates who have unpaid child support or convictions for sexual assault or domestic violence.

The origins and effectiveness of these measures open up new avenues of scholarship in several key areas. First, Mexico’s integration of gender parity with quotas for other marginalized groups indicates that nested quotas—the intertwining of ethnic and gender quotas found in 13 other countries (Hughes 2018, 109)—also benefit from iterative reforms. Second, they broaden the idea of what statutory changes are necessary to make polities more representative and more just, suggesting the fast track and its steady route are not merely about raising descriptive representation, but about eroding the gendered hierarchies of power that previously concentrated authority in the hands of elite men. Our focus on quota reform overall calls attention to how women political actors continue to push the boundaries of the politically possible.
1 Authors’ calculation based on IPU (2021).

2 Why Brazil’s quota remains ineffective lies outside this paper’s scope, but see Wylie, dos Santos, and Marcelino (2019).

3 Some countries have considered 40-60 as parity, like Spain (Verge 2012), but Latin America has understood parity as 50-50 (Piscopo 2016a). Consequently, countries that previously had 40-percent gender quotas—Costa Rica, Honduras, Mexico, and Peru—were not considered to have gender parity.

4 Freidenberg and Caminotti (2016, 131-132) count fewer states, since some adopted gender parity for the proportional representation tier or the single-member districts, but not both.
References


Caminotti, Marianna and Flavia Freidenberg. 2016. “Electoral federalism, the strength of gender quotas and women’s political representation in the subnational spheres in Argentina and Mexico.” *Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales* 61 (228): 121-144.


Diario de los Debates. 2019. LXIV Legislatura-Session Number 31. April 30. Retrieved from


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Current Quota Rule (%)</th>
<th>Adoption (Year)*</th>
<th>Number of reforms</th>
<th>Reform Description (year)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Extension to upper chamber (2000)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Threshold raised from 30% to parity (2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolivia</td>
<td>Both chambers, 50</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Threshold raised from 30% (lower house) and 25% (Senate) to parity for both chambers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>(2009/2010)</td>
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<td>Horizontal parity (2020)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>Lower chamber, 30</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Threshold raised from 25% to 30% (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Quota positions must be filled, not just reserved (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>Both chambers, 40%</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>Both chambers, 50</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30% quota declared unconstitutional (2000)</td>
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<td>30% quota readopted (2011)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Threshold raised from 30% to parity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>Unicameral, 50</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Placement mandate for 40% quota (1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Threshold raised from 40% to parity (2009)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Horizontal parity required (2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominican Republic</td>
<td>Lower chamber, 33</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Threshold raised from 25% to 33% (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Senate exempted (2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Threshold raised from 33% to 40% (2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>Unicameral, 50</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Placement mandate &amp; threshold raised from 20% to 30% (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Threshold raised from 30% to parity &amp; applied to Senate (2008/2009)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Horizontal parity applied to electoral lists (2019)</td>
</tr>
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<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>Unicameral, 30%</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Threshold fixed at 30% (2009)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td>Threshold increased from 30% to 40% and then parity in 2016 (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>Both chambers, 50</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>30% recommendation made mandatory (2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Threshold raised from 30% to 40% (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>loopholes closed &amp; threshold raised to gender parity (2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Horizontal parity for electoral lists (2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Legislative Structure</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Quota</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
<td>Unicameral, 50</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panama</td>
<td>Unicameral, 50</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Threshold raised from 30% to parity (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraguay</td>
<td>Both chambers, 20</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Peru        | Unicameral, 50         | 1997 | 3     | Threshold raised from 25% to 30% (2000)  
|             |                        |      |       | Threshold raised to 40% (2019)  
|             |                        |      |       | Threshold raised to gender parity (2000) |
| Uruguay     | Both chambers, 33      | 2009 | 1     | Eliminated one-time application and made 33% quota permanent (2017) |

Source: Individual country statutes from CEPAL (2021).
Years refer to passage, not year in which laws or policies first applied.

a. Year of constitutional reform followed by year of implementing legislation (counted as one reform)
b. Expires after five elections
c. Implemented by electoral authorities
d. Implemented by presidential decree
Appendix A.

Table A1. Latin America’s Statutory Gender Quotas Beyond the Legislative Branch

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Does the country have a quota for?</th>
<th>Subnational legislatures</th>
<th>Executive or judicial branch</th>
<th>Subnational executive or judicial offices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>Yes – gender parity</td>
<td>Provincial – varies</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolivia</td>
<td>Yes – gender parity</td>
<td>Regional and municipal – gender parity</td>
<td>Judicial - 50%</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>State and local – 30%</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>Yes – gender parity</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Public administration – 30%</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>Yes – gender parity</td>
<td>All subnational – gender parity</td>
<td>Executive – gender parity among two vice presidents</td>
<td>Municipal – gender parity in mayor/vice mayor pairings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominican Republic</td>
<td>Yes – gender parity</td>
<td>Municipal – 33%</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Municipal – gender parity in mayor/vice-mayor pairings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>Yes – gender parity</td>
<td>Yes – gender parity</td>
<td>Executive – gender parity</td>
<td>All appointed and elected public posts – gender parity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>Yes – gender parity</td>
<td>Yes – gender parity</td>
<td>Executive &amp; judicial – gender parity</td>
<td>All appointed and elected public posts – gender parity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>Yes – gender parity</td>
<td>Yes – gender parity</td>
<td>Executive &amp; judicial – gender parity</td>
<td>All appointed and elected public posts – gender parity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
<td>Yes – gender parity</td>
<td>Yes – gender parity</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panama</td>
<td>Yes – gender parity</td>
<td>Yes – gender parity</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraguay</td>
<td>Yes – gender parity</td>
<td>Yes – gender parity</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>Yes – gender parity</td>
<td>Yes – gender parity</td>
<td>Executive - gender parity among president and vice-president</td>
<td>Provincial &amp; municipal – gender parity among governor/vice governor &amp; mayor/vice mayor pairings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uruguay</td>
<td>Yes – gender parity</td>
<td>Yes – gender parity</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>Provincial and municipal – gender parity (2008 only)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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