

From 30 percent to gender parity in everything:
the steady route to raising women's political representation in Mexico

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ABSTRACT

This article 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. This route builds on Drude Dahlerup and Lenita Freidenvall's landmark conceptualization of the fast track, introducing 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 in everything," meaning parity for the executive, legislative, and judicial branches.

RESUMEN

Este artículo evalúa la experiencia de los últimos 30 años de reformas de cuotas de género en América Latina desde el marco teórico clásico de las dos rutas: la incremental y la vía rápida. Al enfocarnos en los continuos esfuerzos de las mujeres políticas para transformar leyes de cuotas de género relativamente débiles en criterios para aplicar la paridad plenamente, argumentamos que mucho de los países que siguieron la "vía rápida" evolucionaron en una ruta constante. La ruta constante se desarrolla a partir de la conceptualización de la vía rápida de Drude Dahlerup y Lenita Freidenvall. Plantea que los países dependen de reformas constantes a la legislación sobre cuotas de género y muestra cómo la innovación en el diseño de las cuotas de género eleva continuamente el nivel de lo que constituye un diseño de cuota "fuerte," o bien, leyes paritarias. Como evidencia de esta ruta analizamos el caso de México, enfocándonos en la reforma de 2014 de paridad en candidaturas legislativas federales y locales y, en 2019, la "paridad en todo," es decir, la paridad en cargos ejecutivos, legislativos, y judiciales.

KEYWORDS Women; political representation; gender quotas; Mexico; Latin America

PALABRAS CLAVE Mujeres; representación política; cuotas de género; México; América Latina

Introduction

The year 2021 marked 30 years of gender quota laws in Latin America. Argentina adopted the contemporary era's first statutory gender quota for women candidates in 1991, when women held less than 10 percent of seats in the region's legislatures (Schwindt-Bayer and Alles 2018).

Today, after dozens of reforms, most Latin American countries have implemented numerically effective quotas, and ten countries have achieved gender parity – understood as gender balance or 50:50 representation. Argentina moved first, but Mexico's journey best characterizes the region's progress. 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 numerical representation (also called “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 quotas, focusing on factors such as democratization, international norm diffusion, women's movements, and male elites' strategic behavior (Archenti and Tula 2017; Atenea 2017; Bareiro and Soto 2019; Bush 2011; Fallon, Swiss, and Viterna 2012; Palma and Cerva 2014; Towns 2012; Valdini 2019; Weeks 2018). Theorizing also focuses on how countries understand the problem of women's political underrepresentation in the first place. In a landmark article that shaped the way in which academic and practitioner audiences came to conceptualize quota adoption, Drude Dahlerup and Lenita Freidenvall (2005) distinguished between countries that believe that equality happens

eventually and therefore rely on voluntary measures, such as targeted recruitment efforts, and countries that opt for state intervention, such as statutory quotas. Countries on the former route choose the incremental track, while those on latter route choose the fast track.

Drawing on data from 30 years of quota adoption and reform, we ask: does the notion of fast and incremental tracks still explain quota adoption? Dahlerup and Freidenvall correctly noted that mandatory quotas would rapidly raise women’s descriptive representation, but they published their article in 2005, during an earlier stage of quota development. The initial quota laws that launched countries on the fast track did not always yield the anticipated numerical gains. These gains came later – often many years later – as women’s political networks secured reforms that foreclosed on parties’ continued evasions, strengthening the application of quotas to national legislatures while expanding their reach to other government levels and branches. The ensuing decades have underscored the central importance of quota *reform*, though Melanie Hughes et al. (2019, 223) note that most theoretical and empirical work remains focused on quotas’ initial adoption.

In this article, 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, the pathway of countries that 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 introducing women advocates’ success at winning iterative quota reforms, and demonstrates how innovation continuously raises the bar for what constitutes a “good” quota law. Like Dahlerup and Freidenvall, we focus on the

statutory changes themselves, even as improvements to quota design – and therefore increases in women’s descriptive representation – ultimately remain insufficient for transforming gendered hierarchies of power. Parties, legislatures, and executives remain gendered institutions and continue to inhibit women’s political empowerment in myriad ways (Archenti and Tula 2017; Sagot 2010). In fact, quota reforms constitute part of ongoing efforts to address persistent inequalities, such as reforms that prevent parties from concentrating women candidates in districts that they expect to lose.

The steady route therefore 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 the loopholes in previous quota reforms. Each reform habituates elites to affirmative action but also identifies new barriers in women’s access to political power. Men party leaders often support and vote for quota reforms in public while enacting strategies that minimize their compliance in practice, therefore preserving gendered hierarchies of power. Women’s networks combat party leaders’ evasions by pushing for ever-stronger quota laws, sharing and diffusing ideas about design across boundaries. Overall, three decades of quota reforms have resulted in new legal and constitutional frameworks that strengthen women’s formal right to be elected.

To illuminate the steady route, we process-trace quota reform in Latin America generally and in Mexico specifically. We draw on public records (laws, policies, and actors’ public statements) and on 27 interviews with men and women quota proponents. After conceptualizing the steady route, our first empirical section traces the evolution of Latin American quota laws from 1991 to today. Similar accounts have been offered previously (Hinojosa and Piscopo 2013; Piscopo 2015; Schwindt-Bayer 2018), but advances continue to outpace scholarship. We highlight novel reforms not fully discussed in the literature: 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 branches of government. Our next empirical sections situate the Mexican case within this regional panorama, 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 constitutional reform known as “parity in everything,” which shifted policy goals from parity among candidates to parity in the composition of all elected and appointed offices. Our conclusion highlights how the steady route demonstrates that quota reforms combat elite resistance to quota implementation and help realize concrete, numerical gains to women’s descriptive representation.

Explaining quota adoption and evolution

The adoption of statutory gender quotas poses a significant puzzle. Men traditionally hold most political offices and therefore make most decisions. Statutory gender quotas – 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?

An important set of explanations focuses on when the political opportunity structure lets proponents’ rhetorical arguments gain traction; namely, democratization allows women to connect regime change to diversifying representation (Htun and Jones 2002; Kang and Tripp 2018; Marx, Borner, and Caminotti 2007; 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 2016; Towns 2012). Similarly, arguments about correcting democratic deficits generated 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 have leveraged the rhetorical power of democratic norms – and actual moments of democratization – to pressure men elites into compliance. Women’s mobilization within and across parties and through cross-party networks has been critical (Palma and Cerva 2014; Sagot 2010). Moreover, party women are embedded in what Line Bareiro and Lilian Soto (2019, 82) describe as a “network of political support for women’s full equality,” which links elites, activists, and state officials to practitioners in international organizations, facilitating cooperation, support, and exchange. Actors come together in regional and international forums, from formal meetings sponsored by international organizations to grassroots feminist encounters and informal exchanges via WhatsApp groups. Through these platforms, actors swap ideas about quota design (Hughes, Krook, and Paxton 2015) and the most persuasive frames (Piscopo 2016). Through such exchanges, quota networks gradually shifted the emphasis from quotas to parity. Today, for instance, Latin America’s quota proponents speak about “substantive equality between women and men” and “parity democracy” (Palma 2021; Piscopo 2015). They position 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 parity as a permanent expression of democracy (Archenti and Tula 2017; Palma 2021).

Yet because arguments connecting gender quotas (or gender parity) to equality and democracy have become an ever-present feature of politics, and because democratic consolidation remains ongoing, some scholars contend that timely rhetoric alone cannot explain

why adoption happens in one moment and not in another. Another set of explanations therefore focuses on why party elites – who remain mostly men – act when they do, explaining that male party elites must see a material benefit and not just a normative advantage in adopting gender quotas (Gatto 2016; Valdini 2019; Weeks 2018). Inter-party competition can push voluntary party quotas’ diffusion from left parties to center or center-right parties, for instance (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 2016). Diffusion across parties, support from right-wing women, and cross-party collaboration help explain specific instances of statutory quota adoption. Alternatively, or perhaps additionally, chief executives might support gender quotas to engage in misdirection: they may adopt quotas to cultivate party women’s loyalty during moments of de-democratization (Larracochea Bohigas 2020) or to distract from corruption scandals or other curbs to civil or political liberties (Valdini 2019).

The details of quota design provide further insight into party elites’ calculations. In Latin America especially, but not exclusively, initial statutory gender quotas contained various loopholes designed to mitigate their effectiveness, meaning that elites could reap all of the rhetorical benefits while paying few of the concrete costs (Hinojosa and Piscopo 2013; Htun and Jones 2002; Murray, Krook, and Opello 2012; Sagot 2010). Yet once weak quotas were adopted, they could be strengthened, as women became committed to ending parties’ evasions, such as relegating women to lower list positions or districts that they expect to lose (Archenti and Tula 2017; Piscopo 2016). This process has generated waves of quota reforms: 44 percent of all

quota-adopting countries had reformed their initial laws 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 this pattern, Hughes et al.’s (2019, 223) global survey of quota adoption and reform notes that the latter remains undertheorized.

Actors, the state, and the fast track

Discrete instances of quota adoption and reform require an alignment between women’s advocacy, political opportunity, and elite incentives. The sum of these alignments indicates a global transformation in the legal and constitutional frameworks through which countries advance women’s political rights. In a pathbreaking article published in 2005, 15 years after Argentina adopted the contemporary era’s first statutory quota law, Dahlerup and Freidenvall (2005) offered a compelling characterization of this transformation. In their view, countries that decide to use state power to end gender inequality take the fast track, adopting quotas, while those that reject state intervention take the incremental track, refusing quotas. Cited more than 800 times since its publication and referenced routinely in practitioner research and policy documents, Dahlerup and Freidenvall’s article made “fast track” and “incremental track” central to the quota lexicon.

As Dahlerup and Freidenvall explain, incremental-track countries such as 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,” and therefore that gender quotas –

which give women preferential treatment relative to men – are not necessary (Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2005, 29–30).

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 deploy affirmative action in order to boost women’s descriptive representation more rapidly. For fast-track countries, quotas target the real source of the problem: the political parties and their role in maintaining gendered hierarchies of political power. 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. Entering the fast track does not mean that all countries adopt the exact same quota (indeed, designs vary), or that all countries achieve the same level of descriptive representation in the same amount of time. Take Brazil, a fast-track country, which adopted a 25 percent gender quota in 1997 and raised the threshold to 30 percent in 2000, but where 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, but actually raising women’s descriptive representation is not guaranteed. Yet for fast-track countries, time does matter in one literal sense: initially weak quota laws need time to be implemented, have their initial deficiencies diagnosed by women politicians and activists, and then be strengthened. Dahlerup and Freidenvall (2005) acknowledge this point, but their conceptualization of the incremental and fast tracks hinges on the decision (or not) to adopt

quotas. They remain agnostic about the later reforms that strengthen quotas' numerical effectiveness.

The centrality of quota reform merits theorizing in its own right. Some countries do make immediate gains in descriptive representation following their first quota adoption (such as Afghanistan; see Larson 2012), but iteration and improvement reflect the more typical experience in Latin America and the globe. Earlier work (Piscopo 2015) characterizes states undertaking quota iteration and improvement as “gender equality activists,” which echoes Dahlerup and Freidenvall’s point that fast-track countries rely on state power. We build on this emphasis on state power while refining these scholars’ treatment of time, arguing that recent developments complicate the original notions of fast and incremental. All fast-track countries employ state action to hurry history along, but we add a steady route through which many fast-track countries then undertake reforms. Iteration and improvement not only strengthen the original legislative quotas but also extend quotas to different branches and levels of government. This process unfolds gradually, not because quotas are considered normatively unacceptable (as on the incremental track), but because designing and winning numerically effective quota laws takes time.

The steady route emphasizes that state power expands *because* networks of women political actors continuously reimagine quota laws. States become gender equality activists not merely because they provide multiple foci of action (Piscopo 2015), but because savvy actors take advantage of these arenas. As party leaders skirt the laws in practice, women develop and share policy design ideas that make the laws stronger. Women’s embeddedness in national and transnational networks facilitates how such ideas travel within and between countries (Bareiro and Soto 2019). Women then lobby for quota reforms on multiple fronts – within parties, within

legislatures, and before electoral management bodies – and at multiple levels of government. Time helps women achieve some victories and then move the goalposts: first they focus on candidate quotas, but then, once compliance is largely secured, they shift to achieving gender balance in electoral results. Such efforts along the steady route do not eliminate the myriad ways in which elected and appointed women face gender discrimination, but they gradually improve women’s numerical representation.

The remainder of this article illustrates the steady route by tracing quota reforms in Latin America generally and in Mexico specifically. For the regional overview, we use primary source documents (legislation, constitutions, and electoral case law) to highlight innovations in quota design. For the Mexican case, we use congressional and administrative records, including debate transcripts; draft laws and laws’ final text; party leaders’ recorded statements before Mexico’s National Electoral Institute (INE, by its Spanish abbreviation); and court rulings (see Appendix for all sources consulted). These sources allow us to trace the views and positions of elites – men and women – during the 2013–2014 constitutional and electoral reforms and the 2019 parity in everything reform. Jennifer Piscopo conducted 27 in-person interviews during fieldwork in December 2013, March 2014, and May 2015, which provide further insight into women’s advocacy during the 2013–2014 reform. Interviewees consisted of current and former women legislators, feminist activists inside and outside the state, and women and men electoral authorities and judges, who all spoke on the condition of anonymity and are identified using a number, the date, and the subject’s position at the time. Lastly, we draw on Lorena Vázquez Correa’s experience as a Mexican researcher-scholar promoting the 2019 reform.

Latin America and the steady route

Understanding the evolution of quotas requires understanding how laws and constitutions have changed in ways that facilitate quotas' numerical effectiveness. Some design features have been widely identified in the literature (Archenti 2014; Caminotti and Freidenberg 2016; Hinojosa and Piscopo 2013; Schwindt-Bayer 2009), but recent innovations remain under-analyzed.

Table 1 documents Latin America's quota adoption and reform, offering updated data that reflects the policy landscape as of 2022. The table lists the quota policies in place in 17 Latin American countries – all nominally democratic countries save Guatemala, which has no quota law. The table includes the year of first adoption; the number of significant constitutional, legislative, or administrative reforms; and the nature of each reform. Most requirements are constitutional or statutory. However, we follow previous studies (Gatto 2017; Piscopo 2015, 2016) and include instances in which women could not gain sufficient votes in the legislature, and therefore worked with electoral agencies to secure administrative changes that boosted the quota laws' effectiveness.

Table 1. Quota adoption and reform in Latin America.

Source: CEPAL (2021).

Notes: Quota adoption shows year of passage, not implementation. a Year of constitutional reform/year of secondary legislation (counted as one reform); b Expires after five elections; c Implemented by electoral authorities; d Implemented by presidential decree.

Country	Current quota rule (percent)	Adoption (year)	Number of reforms	Reform description (year)
Argentina	Both chambers, 50	1991	3	Placement mandate improved (1993, 2000) Extension to upper chamber (2000) Threshold raised from 30 percent to parity (2017)

Bolivia	Both chambers, 50	1997	2	Threshold raised from 30 percent (lower house) and 25 percent (Senate) to parity for both chambers (2009/2010) ^a Horizontal parity (2020) ^c
Brazil	Lower chamber, 30	1997	2	Threshold raised from 25 percent to 30 percent (2000) Quota positions must be filled, not just reserved (2009)
Chile	Both chambers, 40 ^b	2014	0	
Colombia	Both chambers, 50	1998	3	<i>Quota declared unconstitutional (2000)</i> 30 percent quota readopted (2011) Threshold raised from 30 percent to parity (2020)
Costa Rica	Unicameral, 50	1996	3	Placement mandate for 40 percent quota (1999) Threshold raised from 40 percent to parity (2009) Horizontal parity required (2016) ^c
Dominican Republic	Lower chamber, 40	1997	3	Threshold raised from 25 percent to 33 percent (2000) <i>Senate exempted (2002)</i> Threshold raised from 33 percent to 40 percent (2018)
Ecuador	Unicameral, 50	1997	3	Placement mandate and threshold raised from 20 percent to 30 percent (2000) Threshold raised from 30 percent to parity and applied to Senate (2008/2009) ^a Horizontal parity applied to electoral lists (2019)
El Salvador	Unicameral, 30 ^b	2013	0	
Honduras	Unicameral, 50	2000	3	Fine for non-compliant parties introduced (2004) <i>Threshold fixed at 30 percent (2009)</i> Threshold increased from 30 percent to 40 percent and then parity in 2016 (2012) ^d
Mexico	Both chambers, 50	1996	5	30 percent recommendation made mandatory (2002) Threshold raised from 30 percent to 40 percent (2008) Loopholes closed and threshold raised to gender parity (2014) Horizontal parity for electoral lists (2017) ^c Gender parity in everything (2019)
Nicaragua	Unicameral, 50	2012	0	

Panama	Unicameral, 50	1997	1	Threshold raised from 30 percent to parity (2012)
Paraguay	Both chambers, 20	1996	0	
Peru	Unicameral, 50	1997	3	Threshold raised from 25 percent to 30 percent (2000) Threshold raised to 40 percent (2019) Threshold raised to gender parity (2020)
Uruguay	Both chambers, 33	2009	1	One-time application eliminated and 33 percent quota made permanent (2017)
Venezuela	Both chambers, 50	1998	3	<i>Quota declared unconstitutional (2000)</i> Parity applied (2008, 2015) ^c

The first takeaway is that Latin American countries have nearly universally raised their quota thresholds over time, with actors now advocating for gender parity as a distinctive and permanent expression of gender equality and democracy. Of the 18 Latin American countries, 12 adopted their first gender quotas in the 1990s, setting thresholds at 20, 30, or 40 percent. Currently, 16 countries have implemented some form of statutory gender quota. Ten countries now have gender parity. Furthermore, parity has evolved from a lower threshold in all cases save Nicaragua.³

The second takeaway is that quotas have become stronger and more creative. Countries have added sanctions for parties that fail to nominate the required number of women and installed placement mandates that require parties to place women in list positions or districts where they have realistic chances of winning. A novel innovation shown in Table 1 is the recent application of placement mandates to the list-header positions. “Vertical parity” refers to the alternation of men’s and women’s names down a single list, which constituted an important reform in the 1990s and early 2000s. As parity became more popular, women’s networks began insisting on “horizontal parity,” meaning the alternation of men and women in the number one spot *across* all lists. Installing a placement mandate eliminates parties’ practice of minimally

complying with vertical parity by nominating men to the first list position and women to the second (Freidenberg and Lajas García 2015; Tula 2021). Bolivia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Mexico have all adopted horizontal parity in the last four years. To our knowledge, Latin America is the first global region where multiple countries have adopted this particular quota reform.

The third takeaway is the overall predominance of quota evolution through repeated reform. By our count, the 18 Latin American countries have reformed their quota laws 34 times. Twelve countries have reformed their initial quota law at least once. The modal number of reforms is three. Furthermore, reforms weaken or repeal quotas very rarely. In Honduras and the Dominican Republic, efforts at weakening were later followed by strengthening. In Colombia and Venezuela, high courts ruled the statutory quotas as unconstitutional, but subsequent developments (a constitutional reform in Colombia and the electoral body's initiative in Venezuela) allowed the quotas to be re-adopted (Piscopo 2015). The similarity of reforms despite countries' differing electoral systems further reflects how design ideas cross borders while adapting to specific contexts. For instance, countries with closed-list systems more readily adopt placement mandates, but the importance of women as list headers has influenced countries with open-list systems. Chile, which uses open lists, introduced a one-off rule for the 2021–2022 constitutional assembly elections that women must head all lists, 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 the application of quotas to other government branches and to subnational governments, as illustrated by Table 2.

Table 2. Latin America’s statutory gender quotas beyond the legislative branch.
Source: CEPAL (2021).

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

Uruguay	Provincial and municipal –33%	No	No
Venezuela	Provincial and municipal – gender parity (2008 only)	No	No

Of the 18 countries, 12 have extended their quota laws to regional and/or municipal elections. Four countries also apply gender parity to the chief executive 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, Honduras, and Peru 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. Again with the exception of Nicaragua, all parity extensions at the subnational level or to other branches came *after* the countries’ initial quota law, further underscoring the importance of time.

The steady route thus captures the overall arc of policy change in Latin America, which tends toward stronger legal and constitutional frameworks in order to raise women’s descriptive representation. Of course, formal changes and increases to women’s descriptive representation alone cannot generate equality. Parties and institutions do not transform overnight. Women political elites still need to organize inside these spaces for collective power (Rodríguez Gustá 2015), and their entry can fuel resistance, harassment, and even violence (Albaine 2015). Women may prioritize party loyalty over transformative change, and they may even support presidents and policies that erode democracy and human rights (Archenti and Tula 2017; Bareiro and Soto 2019; Larracoechea Bohigas 2020). Quota reform is not a panacea, though the steady

route addresses persistent inequality in one way: as party leaders find ways to evade quota laws' loopholes, women's networks lead the charge for reforms that would close them.

Mexico begins its fast-track journey

The Mexican case demonstrates this iterative process. The country is among the 12 Latin American countries that adopted initial gender quotas in the 1990s, the ten that now implement gender parity, and the six that adopted a parity reform within the past five years (2017–2022). In Mexico, as in other cases throughout the region (Bareiro and Soto 2019), women political elites have pushed for quota reforms for more than 20 years. They have connected within and across political parties and collaborated with feminists in the state and in civil society, including journalists, academics, and lawyers. They have sought quota revisions at the national and subnational levels and in different branches of government (Caminotti and Freidenberg 2016; Palma and Cerna 2014; Piscopo 2016).

As in most Latin American countries, the initial adoption of quotas in Mexico occurred alongside democratization. In the 1980s, Mexico began a series of electoral reforms that eroded the dominance of the once hegemonic Party of the Institutional Revolution. Opposition parties gained ground in state and federal legislatures during the 1980s and 1990s, forcing a succession of electoral reforms that gradually made the political system more competitive. Mexico passed seven electoral reforms between 1987 and 2008 (Hinojosa 2008; Magaloni 2005), and more followed in the 2010s.

Each electoral reform created a window of opportunity. Women in political parties and civil society convened conferences to articulate their demands, such as 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). The events' action items addressed multiple policy areas, including political participation. As a feminist leader who coordinated the women's parliaments reflected, increasing women's political representation is *the* policy area in which women have consensus, given how it benefits women across the ideological spectrum (Interview 4, December 17, 2013). Other interviewees echoed the sentiment that gender quotas were and continue to be an issue that unites women across the 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 a mandatory 30 percent and then to 40 percent in the 2008 reform. Echoing our interviewees' reflections on this period, Kathleen Bruhn (2003, 115–116) concludes that quota adoption unfolded thanks to “inter-activist linkages” that leveraged the democratizing moment to shame and blame parties opposed to increasing women's political participation. Parties did not see benefits to adopting quotas, but they did fear costs from outwardly resisting them.

In other words, party leaders acquiesced in public while ensuring that the actual laws contained loopholes to be exploited in practice. Mexico elects its 128-member Senate using electoral lists at the state and federal levels (with different formulas at each level) and its 500-member lower house, the Chamber of Deputies, 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 exploited the loophole exempting 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 2016). Parties also exploited Mexico’s unique system of pairing each candidate with an alternate, assigning men as 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) and brought a court case before Mexico’s federal electoral court (the TEPFJ, by its Spanish abbreviation) in 2011. (The electoral court system operates independently, and the federal chamber has final say over 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 closing the internal vote loophole. A TEPJF magistrate explained that the court was “moved by this collection of women” and saw an opportunity to “interpret the law in line with human rights norms” about political equality (Interview 19, May 7, 2015). The court-mandated 40 percent gender quota without loopholes would make gender parity a much smaller – and therefore easier – leap.

From a 30 percent gender quota to gender parity

The evolution of quotas 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 Mexico’s constitution, state legislatures are unicameral bodies elected using proportional representation and single-member

districts. Mexican states adopted quotas starting in the 1990s, with two states adopting mandatory, statutory quotas well before the mandatory, statutory federal quota. In the 20 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 (Atenea 2017, 43).⁴

These developments prepared the ground for gender parity as Mexico began its 2013–2014 constitutional reform process, the hallmark project of then president Enrique Peña Nieto. Several women senators from *Mujeres en Plural* enjoyed close ties with Peña Nieto, and they persuaded him to include gender parity in the draft reforms forwarded to the Mexican Congress in October 2013 (Interview 17, May 7, 2015). Peña Nieto's support limited 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). At the time, men led all of the Chamber of Deputies' five party delegations and six of the Senate's seven delegations.

Yet silence did not mean support. At one point, parity disappeared from the Senate's version of the constitutional reform, and three women senators, from different parties, together issued a floor amendment to reintroduce it. No senator dared object on the record. Instead, two men senators, from opposition parties, and perhaps looking to seize free publicity, responded with lavish praise for the women senators' collective work and great achievement. With parity back in, wrangling then occurred over the wording. Would the constitution say that political parties should “strive for” parity or “guarantee” it? Women senators waged a fierce and ultimately successful battle for the stronger word, “guarantee” (Interview 23, May 11, 2015).

The revised constitution, approved in February 2014, required that parties guarantee gender parity for both the federal *and* state legislatures, thereby ending the patchwork of state-level quota laws. One congresswoman's explanation neatly captures the steady route at work: "Gender parity emerged from all the years that came before" (Interview 15, May 6, 2015). Yet even this achievement was not final. The exact mechanisms would need spelling out in secondary laws that updated the electoral rules. Each Mexican state also needed to bring its constitution and election laws in line with the federal constitution, a process known as "harmonization." These next steps created opportunities for more innovation along the steady route.

The 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 federal 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 the INE and women from right, center, and left parties wanted to end parties' long-standing practice of concentrating women candidates in districts that they expect to lose. They proposed a "three-tier rule," according to which 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). However, the men party leaders balked at this proposal. A

woman senator recalled that “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, in which the 2014 General Law on Political Parties stipulated that parties could not “exclusively” assign “one of the genders” to districts that they expect to lose.

The three-tier rule had failed in the Congress, but its proponents would not give up. An INE leader explained the problem: “If they [parties] nominate just one woman to a winning district, then it’s not ‘exclusively’” (Interview 12, May 4, 2015). In other words, parties could easily comply with the letter – though not the spirit – of the law. As a result, women authorities in the INE fell back on tried-and-true shaming tactics. Parties could not be *prohibited* from placing higher proportions of women in districts that they expect to lose, but they could be shamed for doing so. Women INE leaders then waged a year-long campaign to persuade their male colleagues that, starting with the 2015 elections, the 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 the parties paid attention: to avoid negative publicity, their 2015 candidate nominations largely followed the three-tier rule (Interview 12, May 4, 2015; Interview 22, May 8, 2015).

This cycle of progress and resistance captures how countries move along the steady route, with ideas about quota improvement circulating until the right combination of opportunity, activism, and incentives helps them stick. 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

Innovative applications of gender parity traveled vertically as well. Mexican states can regulate municipal elections, and as states began harmonizing their constitutions and electoral codes, Mujeres en Plural saw an opportunity to advance even further: revised state laws could include the municipalities (Interview 23, May 11, 2015). 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 municipalities back into play. Mujeres en Plural brought state legislators and state electoral officials into their network, with success. Several states did rewrite their constitutions and election laws so that vertical parity applied to the state legislatures *and* municipal governments, leading to a new subnational patchwork in which some states’ innovations outpaced those at the federal level (Piscopo 2017).

Implementing gender parity in the municipalities then led to horizontal parity, as a result of Mexico’s distinctive municipal election system. Parties present a single ticket of executive and legislative posts, and the mayoral position is always first. Yet if parties minimally complied with vertical parity – that is, by always nominating men as list headers – then women would never be nominated as mayoral candidates. Women claimed that vertical parity amounted to systematic discrimination, and they initiated suits before the electoral courts in various states. The TEPJF ultimately agreed: “You cannot relegate women to the secondary posts,” explained one

magistrate (Interview 19, May 7, 2015). In ruling that, for municipal elections in each state, parties must distribute list-header positions evenly between men and women, the TEPJF effectively introduced 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 the 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 of Deputies' proportional representation lists. Political parties on both the left and the right protested these regulations before Mexico's electoral court, but the TEPJF again chose to expand the application of parity. With the TEPJF's backing, the INE determined that parties must alternate the first list position between men and women across their lists for the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, *and* that a woman must head each party's single federal list for the Senate (followed by vertical parity thereafter).

Neither the constitutional nor the electoral reforms of 2013–2014 had contemplated horizontal parity. Thanks to the INE and the TEPJF introducing more innovations and moving Mexico along the steady route, the 2018 elections resulted in a gender parity legislature. Exactly 25 years after the 1993 electoral reform merely recommended a 30 percent quota, women won 48.2 percent of Mexico's lower house and 49.2 percent of the Senate (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 well-designed quota law. In Mexico, this progression culminated with the 2019 reform that activists and the government called “parity in everything”: a constitutional amendment mandating gender balance in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, the autonomous Indigenous communities, and party leadership.

Earlier reforms once against established the groundwork. Just as some states’ adoption of gender parity for the state legislatures made the leap to gender parity in the federal Congress less dramatic, horizontal parity for the municipal governments made the jump to gender parity in the other branches easier. 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 governors – perhaps the most prized political positions in the country due to their high profile, access to resources, and ability to position candidates for presidential bids.

Women senators began working behind the scenes. At the time, each chamber comprised eight party delegations, and men headed six of the eight in each chamber. Women senators wanted the parity in everything bill to list the governorships, but informal conversations revealed that party leaders would not agree. 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, Gálvez Ruiz continued, “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). Ultimately, dropping the specific mention of

governorships allowed parity in everything to advance, echoing how previous reforms had moved forwards only once a loophole was introduced.

Senator Kenia López Rabadán, also from a right party, formally introduced the parity in everything bill. 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 to the bill, every party delegation decided to claim credit by crafting their own proposal. All advanced from committees, with slight variations in wording – but none were opposed to parity. When the scheduled plenary debate was bumped because of an agenda conflict, Mujeres en Plural, the parity advocacy 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 May 2019. Men senators again used the opportunity to perform their outward support. Each party delegation leader went on record withdrawing their party's competing bills and each offered a speech praising women's achievement. For instance, opposition senator Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong said, “I congratulate the men for today is the day we accompany the women ... we celebrate parity, parity in everything in our country, parity in Mexico” (Diario de los debates 2019, 127–129). The women senators' version then received unanimous approval in both houses, with not a single abstention.

The approved constitutional 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. When the 2021 elections arrived, party leaders' actions confirmed that, public praise notwithstanding, they would not yield the governorships. Congresswomen reported that men party leaders told them to keep quiet, and party delegation leaders (all men) even introduced legislation that would formally exempt the gubernatorial races from parity in everything (Inmujeres 2021). Again, the INE intervened and closed the loophole, including parity in the gubernatorial races in the administrative rules governing the 2021 elections. Again, the parties resisted, contesting the INE's rules before the TEPJF while insisting that they still supported parity. The party president of Morena, which then held the presidency, even said, "We promote parity for conviction ... But we don't agree with INE acting like a legislative power" (INE 2020). Nonetheless, the TEPJF again favored the maximal interpretation, determining that each party must nominate at least seven women in the 15 races.

The 2021 elections thus marked a watershed for gender parity in Mexico. Women won six gubernatorial races, the largest number of women governors ever elected in Mexico. The electoral authorities also transformed the constitutional mandate for gender parity in candidates into gender parity of results. Women had made up 51 percent of the lower house candidates but won only 49.6 percent of the seats. Weeks after, the TEPJF modified the seat assignments 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 had again shifted the goalposts for achieving gender parity.

Conclusion: the steady route toward democratic parity

Three decades of quota reform in Latin America have transformed women's descriptive representation. In Mexico, as in the region, gender parity has become the norm – and not only among candidates, but also among officeholders. Given how much women in the 1990s struggled “just” to win 30 percent quotas, today's constitutional and statutory frameworks are perhaps more advanced than anyone anticipated back in 2005, when the term “fast track” first entered scholars' and practitioners' lexicon.

The centrality of quota reform has led us to revisit Dahlerup and Freidenvall's (2005) notion of the fast track and to refine its notion of time. To capture the relationship between reforms and time, we propose the steady route as a modal pathway *within* the fast track, drawing attention to the iterative processes often overlooked by scholars still explaining the puzzle of initial adoption. Along the steady route, 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. 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 (IDEA 2022). In Africa, too, the norm is becoming quota strengthening over successive waves of reform (Bauer 2021, 338).

Like the fast track, the steady route is a stylized characterization. The steady route introduces the notion of time-to-reform, but the fast track and the steady route allow for significant variation in countries' journey. The exact moments when women win reforms depends on the alignment between political opportunity and elites' incentives. Whether raising women's numerical representation also leads to women's substantive political equality similarly varies across time and place. For Latin American countries such as El Salvador, Nicaragua, and

Venezuela, leaders' efforts to consolidate one-party control accelerate democratic backsliding and curtail feminist policymaking. Indeed, these are the countries with the fewest quota reforms, and future work could more closely interrogate whether and how de-democratization impedes progress along the steady route.

For 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, if the fast track is conceived more broadly, as countries' adoption of *any* legal measures that guarantee women's political participation, then other iterations remain. In the most recent Mexican elections, for instance, several states adopted electoral quotas for Indigenous peoples, Afro-Mexicans, people with disabilities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) people, applying gender parity *within* each target group. Bolivia, Brazil, and Mexico have all recently adopted laws to sanction and prevent violence against women in politics. Overall, women political actors continue to see promise in statutes' ability to erode gender inequalities in political representation. The steady route produces no guarantees, but demonstrates how women political actors continue to push the boundaries of policy and law.

Notes

1 Authors' calculation based on IPU (2021).

2 For a discussion of why Brazil remains an outlier, see Wylie, dos Santos, and Marcelino (2019).

3 Some countries consider 40:60 to be parity, such as Spain (Verge 2012), but Latin America understands parity as 50:50 (Archenti and Tula 2017). Consequently, we do not count countries' adoption of 40 percent quotas as achieving gender parity.

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

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