

Book Review: The Impact of Gender Quotas

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*With the increasing prominence which debates about gender quotas enjoy within public life, it is imperative that we understand how, if at all, they achieve the ends to which they are directed. It is in this context that **The Impact of Gender Quotas** stands as an important contribution to a pressing political debate. **Linnea Sandström Lange** finds the book to be full of empirical insights into the efficacy of gender quotas, arguing that the rather pessimistic immediate picture painted by the studies detailed in the book should be counter-balanced by acknowledging the as yet unclear long-term effects of gender quotas.*

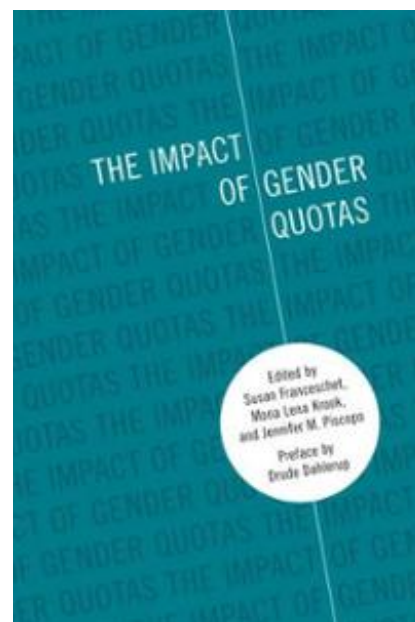
The Impact of Gender Quotas. Franceschet Susan, Mona Lena Krook and Jennifer M. Piscopo (Eds). Oxford University Press. 2012.

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How efficient are gender quotas? That is the question being asked by a range of authors in this book, edited by [Susan Franceschet](#), [Mona Lena Krook](#) and [Jennifer M. Piscopo](#). Gathering famous names such as Sarah Childs, Petra Meier, and Drude Dahlerup, this book explores quota systems which are descriptive, substantive and symbolic. Given the recent debating of gender quotas on corporate board membership in the European Union, it is crucially important we understand their potential as a tool to correct gender discrimination.

Are the women recruited under quotas really less competent and deserving of their positions than their non-quota counterparts? Or is this an irrational fear on the behalf of people reluctant to give up their power? The authors consider this question in the first section of the book, which looks at descriptive representation. A cross-country comparison seems to strongly suggest the latter, with examples from France, Argentina, Uganda and Morocco showing that women are just as qualified as their male counterparts. Women, however, tend to have less high level legislative experience prior to entering national parliaments and often have different academic backgrounds than male legislators. Women in legislative offices, like men, tend to have a large network in the political and government sectors. Since one of the ideas behind quotas is that having more women increases the health of democratic representation, this led all authors in this section to question whether the women recruited because of quotas actually were representative of the demographic they were presumably there to represent. This is not a problem specific to quota women, but one of female legislators in general being more qualified and educated than the average woman in their countries.

In the second section on substantive representation, the authors examine if bringing in women had substantially increased the amount of legislation regarding 'women's interests'. Labour MPs who had been a part of the United Kingdom quota lists in the post-1997 elections reported, when interviewed, that they did not dare to focus too much on women's issues out of fear of not being able to advance their political careers or even of losing their jobs. In other countries like South Africa and Afghanistan, women are being selected to parliaments through quota mandates based on how loyal they are to their parties, constraining the effects women can feasibly have on introducing women's interests into parliament.



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It is quite clear that the structuring of institutions has a great bearing on how efficiently women can legislate, as in the case of Rwanda, which has the largest number of women in parliament since the introduction of quotas, and where initiation of legislation remains in the hands of the executive branch. It is shown in the final section on symbolic representation that women's presence does little to increase political interest and participation among women, corroborating a large quantitative cross-country study on countries who have adopted quotas by [Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer](#).

The most significant conclusion in the book is solidified in this section, where it becomes clear that women's quotas do not work in the way that they are intended—to increase legislation on women's issues and to work as role-models for other women with the purpose of increasing women's participation and interest in politics—as long as a strong cultural support for quotas is absent. It seems that viewing women legislators who have gained their seats through quota mechanisms unfavourably leads to a status quo despite trying to correct for the under-representation of women. For instance, Zetterberg notes how the “authoritarian features of Mexican politics might make citizens disappointed in and mistrusting of politicians and reluctant to engage in politics”, showing how already existing institutional structures counteract the potential positive changes that might be sparked by gender quotas.

Believers in gender quotas need not despair. There have been positive impacts as a consequence of gender quotas, with women in some countries thinking of quotas as “a correction of incorrectly functioning selection mechanisms”. However, the positive effects of gender quotas remain inconclusive at best and while this does not mean that quotas should not continue to be taken seriously as an attempt to fairly represent women, *The Impact of Gender Quotas* shows us that we have to continue the cultural battles as well. As a radical tool to right the wrongs of gender biases, quotas do not seem to be the best option, but the studies in this book are important and should be continued. Gender quotas may very well have a significant long-term positive impact. This book shows that it is still too early to tell.

Linnea Sandström Lange was an MSc student in Gender, Policy and Inequalities at the LSE Gender Institute in 2011-12 and her dissertation was titled ‘Is the Institution of Marriage Necessary for Good Citizenship: a study into US Civic Virtue’. She graduated in June 2011 with an MA in Social Sciences (Politics) from the University of Glasgow. She keeps a blog called [Feminism and Tea](#) and can often be found discussing gender on [various social networks](#) when not feeding her news addiction. [Read more reviews by Linnea](#).