

Book Review: Political Power and Women's Representation in Latin America

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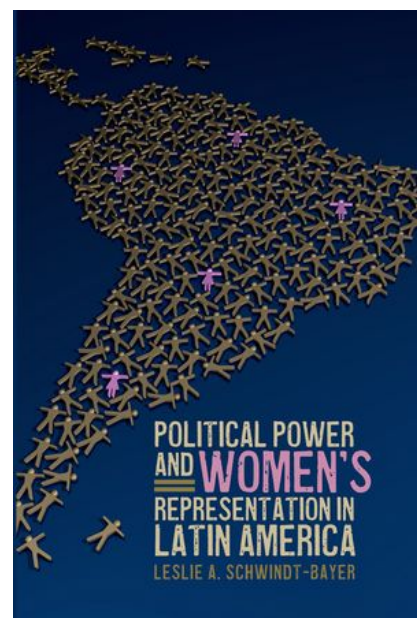
In *Political Power and Women's Representation in Latin America*, **Leslie Schwindt-Bayer** examines the causes and consequences of women's representation in Latin America. She does so by asking a series of politically relevant and theoretically challenging questions, including why the numbers of women in office have increased in some countries but vary across others; what the presence of women in office means for the way representatives legislate; and what consequences the election of women bears for representative democracy more generally. Schwindt-Bayer shows how the inclusion of women in politics has changed the issues brought into the political arena, writes **Natalie Novick**.



Political Power and Women's Representation in Latin America.
Leslie Schwindt Bayer. Oxford University Press. November 2012.

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On the opening page of the new paperback edition of *Political Power and Women's Representation in Latin America*, [Leslie Schwindt-Bayer](#), Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Missouri, writes that four women have been elected president of Latin American democracies and that many others have "run for, and seriously contended, executive office." The number of those elected to presidency has now increased to six – with Laura Chinchilla in Costa Rica and Dilma Rouseff in Brazil taking office – marking the rapid acceleration of the influence and presence of women in all levels of politics in Latin America. Later this year, female candidates will contest presidential elections in Chile and Honduras, as well as legislative elections throughout the region, providing an excellent justification for this look at the impact of women's representation in the region.



At the time of writing, the percentage of women in national legislatures in Latin America hovers at around 20%, a regional average second only to the Nordic countries. These numbers came about rapidly, and only continue to rise, but despite the rate of change, women remain a minority in legislatures and executive offices in Latin America. This text analyses the variation in women's representation within Latin America, both *descriptively*, by examining the percentage of women in government, as well as *substantively*, by examining outcomes of women's representation within the legislature. Schwindt-Bayer's contribution aims to bridge the literature on women's representation and apply it to the Latin American case using a multidimensional, integrated model.

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Schwindt-Bayer's grasp and command of the existing literature is extensive, and the text is impeccably researched. Schwindt-Bayer seeks to bring sometimes competing earlier explanations together, and apply hypotheses used systematically elsewhere to the understudied Latin American case. However, by resting on this basis, some findings, such as the regional examination of women's *descriptive* representation in Chapter 2, are unsurprising. While the quantitative analysis is thoughtfully prepared, the result is not unexpected: a greater presence of women in the legislature in countries with proportional representation electoral systems, gender quotas and longer experiences with democracy. It is rather her examination of the *substantive* effects of women's representation where the book provides its greatest contribution. Using original surveys of legislators in Argentina, Colombia and Costa Rica, Schwindt-Bayer was able to collect original data on political preferences, backgrounds, experience and ambition, which are used to provide the bulk of evidence for her chapters on *substantive* representation (3-7). Schwindt-Bayer finds variation between the issues that male legislators prioritize compared to the issues that female legislators prioritize. Despite expressing the importance of representing all constituents, Schwindt-Bayer's quantitative models find that women legislators place a higher priority on women's equality issues than men do, after controlling for other factors. More importantly, these priorities translate into action.

In Chapter 4, Schwindt-Bayer investigates how gender affects bills sponsored by legislators and the participation of legislators in committees and floor debates. While the differences the author finds do not always involve gender issues, they are among the most striking. In nearly all cases she finds that women sponsor more bills related to women's issues than men, and in the Colombian Senate, women sponsored nearly 15 times more bills related to women's issues. Furthermore, women participated in floor debates more often on women's issues. However, these gender differences were not just confined to the legislature. In Chapter 6, Schwindt-Bayer addresses an understudied area of the representation literature, by examining how gender affects legislator actions within the district or constituency. Careful to account for differences between political systems, she finds male and female legislators attend to similar types of district activities, such as attending meetings with similar groups, addressing casework requests, and spending time on constituency service. However, gender differences emerge when examining constituency work dealing with women's advocacy and responsibility. In all cases, female legislators were more likely to attend activities with women's groups than their male counterparts, as well as spend more time with female constituents than their male colleagues. Additionally, the wide majority of female representatives surveyed expressed the importance of seeing themselves as a role model for women in their districts, recognizing the symbolic importance of their presence in politics. These results suggest that in many areas, female representatives are more likely to introduce and promote women and women's issues within the legislature and through work within the district. Schwindt-Bayer's findings allow her to come to a definitive conclusion, "women in these national legislatures clearly represent women".

The text accomplishes the goals it sets out for itself, shedding new light on the substantive outcomes of female representation by developing a more comprehensive look at legislative activity, as well as presenting new data gleaned by original survey work. However, some readers may find themselves urging Schwindt-Bayer to push the envelope beyond the safety of the established theoretical perspectives, by showing how the Latin American case is unique and different. This is primarily a book about women's representation, which uses Latin America as a lens. It is clear when reading the text that Schwindt-Bayer has an excellent command on her case selection and knows the context of her Latin American subjects very well. However, there is little in her methodology that treats Latin America specifically, to set it apart from previous research on representation done in Europe and the United States. In her introduction, Schwindt-Bayer suggests that female legislators in Latin America have moved beyond the "supermadre" archetype prevalent in Latin American politics in the 1960s and 1970s, however, she does not provide enough detail to show what this looks like today, or how this process has taken place. While she mentions the impact of quotas and how reserved seats may impact perceptions and women's legislative activity, I would have expected a text on women's representation in Latin America to address quotas more centrally, as the region was the first to adopt gender quotas on a large scale. The ongoing push for quotas in Latin America has had numerous impacts on the way that women are presented for, run for, and behave in office.

While Schwindt-Bayer comes to conclusions about women's representation that have been explored elsewhere, this text fulfills an important need in the research. The question of whether women legislate differently to men continues to orient many of the critiques against scholarship exploring gender in the political science literature. By thoroughly engaging with, and answering this question, Schwindt-Bayer shows just how much gender matters and how the inclusion of women in politics changes the issues brought into the political arena. She provides conclusive evidence across the scope of legislative behaviour that a legislator's gender has a substantive impact on political outcomes. Furthermore, by bringing together the vast amount of previous theoretical perspectives, she is able to provide a definitive, evaluation of the literature as well as make the case for its application to other understudied regions.

Natalie Novick is currently pursuing a PhD in Sociology at the University of California, San Diego. Her research examines the outcomes of cultural and structural inequalities on women's representation in government and foreign affairs. In 2009 she received her M.Sc. in Comparative European Politics from Trinity College, Dublin. Prior to her graduate studies she worked in legislative affairs in Washington, DC and Phoenix, Arizona. You can find her on twitter [@genderpolitics](#). [Read more reviews by Natalie.](#)