

The Mexican 'Propietario' and 'Suplente' system shows the degree to which quotas can empower women in politics

By Democratic Audit UK

*How do gender quotas interact with women's empowerment? Looking at evidence from Mexico, **Fernanda Vidal** shows that the system of candidate nomination for the Congress, the 'Propietario' and 'Suplente' system has overcome early difficulties to be an effective tool for ensuring a degree of gender representation.*



Palacio Nacional, Mexico (Credit: Bradleyolin, CC BY 2.0)

Federalism can expand the range of powers available to sub-national units, which then decide on policy on a range of topics, including education, health, reproductive rights, political affairs, and others. In this sense, federalism should matter to women, because federal constitutions may assign jurisdiction over policy to central or [meso-level governments](#).

In Mexico, federalism pluralised competition in sub-national legislatures and gave space for opposition parties to challenge the hegemonic party. Federalism helped shape Mexico's democratic transition, and in doing so it also affected and transformed the opportunities that women had to become politically engaged.

The federal system has allowed for different institutional arrangements to affect the representation of women in different ways. The variations across the States makes it important to distinguish and interpret the impact of Mexico's federal arrangements on the political representation of women, taking into consideration that these generate different institutional contexts, as well as creating different opportunities and constraints that women must either face or take advantage of.

Disparities between the rules concerning gender equality at the sub-national level in Mexico have been previously assessed. Studies have claimed that in some states, such as the *Federal District* or at the national level, regulations generate better conditions for women to pursue a political career. Within these rules it is important to highlight the zipping lists in the election of Proportional Representation (PR) representatives as well as quotas applied in PR and First Past the Post (FPTP).

However, there are some states, like *Aguascalientes*, *BajaCalifornia Sur* or *Querétaro*, where no zipping applied or no quota exists. In that sense, federalism in Mexico resulted in inconsistent regulations that affect differently, for better or worse, women [across the country](#). Nonetheless, some changes are happening and consequences are yet to be observed.

In February 2014 changes to the electoral system were passed in Congress, including relevant federal regulations regarding women's representation. These changes originate from a decision that was taken by the Electoral Court on November 2011. This was to prevent the possibility of the so-called "Juanitas" cases being repeated. Initially, the term was used to make reference to federal deputies, many of them women, that after two days of having been sworn as deputies, requested leaves of absence, making way for the *suplentes* candidates, who were men. Moreover, the men that got the seats were related to these women. Some were siblings or husbands. Women were pressured, through loyalty and career expectancy arguments, to resign and leave their seats to their joint ticket partners.

According to the *Milenio* newspaper, of the 15 *suplentes*, 11 of them replaced an equal number of *Juanitas* deputies from different political parties, including the PRI, the PAN, the PVEM and the PT2. The newspaper reported that this resulted in 13 women in total being displaced from their seats by family members or political patrons in the [61st Legislature](#). Thus, the Electoral Court established the criteria to ensure that 40% of nominees were women in the joint ticket system.

The ruling file (SUP–JDC–12624/2011) established that the nomination of women as *propietarios* would have to be accompanied by a *suplente* of the same sex in order to prevent substitutions by male representatives. The effects of this change were visible in the difficult and intricate candidate selection process of the 2012 Federal Election. In an unprecedented result, women accounted 37.2% of the Deputies Chamber, an increase of 9%. However, this ruling had no consequences for the state nominations process.

In order to secure the ruling of the Court, in the 2014 electoral reforms, Congress approved new party laws that include specific regulations regarding women's representation. First, registered candidates (*propietario* and *suplente*) should be of the same gender. Second, political parties ought to promote and ensure gender balance in the nomination of candidates at any level of government (legislative branch). Third, Proportional Representation lists will be composed by formulas of candidates; each with a *propietario* and a *suplente* of the same gender and different formulas will alternate to ensure gender parity (this means zipping the joint ticket). Finally, formulas of candidates running for the Senate must be composed by people of different gender and must be zipped too.

The approval of these new laws may be met with modifications in State Constitutions. The former must make changes in order to secure the second part of the amendment, which demands from all levels of legislative government, to comply with mechanisms that promote and ensure gender balance. This may take some time. Nonetheless, the consequences of this change may be observed in the forthcoming 2015 elections, and certainly, if sustained, the democratic process may be reinforced, and federalism may start working for women in Mexico.

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