


NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Blessing in Disguise? How the Gendered Division of Labor in Political Science Helped Achieved Gender Parity in the Chilean Constitutional Assembly

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On October 18, 2019, a social uprising in Chile took many national and foreign analysts by surprise. Protests, demonstrations, arson, looting, and rioting occurred in the streets of major cities across the country, sparked by a modest rise in subway fares and a police crackdown on high school students hopping over turnstiles. Demonstrators' violence and police abuse, intertwined with large-scale peaceful rallies, exposed structural conditions of social and economic inequality and a profound crisis of political representation.

The demonstrators' motto, "Until Dignity Becomes a Habit!," brought together the demands of several groups of protesters (Suárez-Cao 2021). Their many demands exposed the limitations of dictator Augusto Pinochet's constitution as an "institutional straitjacket" that had blocked many widely urged reforms (Piscopo and Siavelis 2021). The idea that a new constitution could set a path to rewriting the broken social pact, at the same time that it could advance the addressing of social grievances, gained strength amid disoriented elites. Late at night on November 15, 2019, party leaders from the left and the right signed an agreement to organize a referendum in which voters would decide on whether the constitution should be changed and, if so, what the replacement mechanism should be.

The Opportunity for Enhancing Women's Representation

The referendum opened an unprecedented window of opportunity for increasing women's representation. Since 1995, more than 130 countries have implemented some form of gender quota system (Krook 2017), the effectiveness of which varies depending on other institutional features of electoral rules and the

strength of quota laws (Caminotti and Freidenberg 2016). Chile is the most recent Latin American country to adopt mandatory gender quotas for legislative elections. Elites were traditionally reluctant to raise the issue of women's under-representation in politics. In 2015, however, discussions about comprehensive electoral reform enabled the center-left government and women's rights activists to lobby successfully for a provision preventing the registration of party lists running more than 60% of candidates of the same sex.

Although Chile was late in introducing affirmative action in its legislation, and thus could have learned from quota experiments across Latin America, the quota design was deeply flawed (Le Foulon and Suárez-Cao 2018). It only established that lists could not exceed the nomination of 60% of candidates of the same sex nationally. This provision allowed parties to nominate 40% women in whichever districts they see fit, permitting them to place women in unwinnable seats. As a result, when the quota was first implemented in 2017, the 40% of women candidates nominated translated into a meager 23% of women elected to the lower house.

A year later, in 2018, Chile was swept by a feminist wave that included over 150 protests across the country. In the universities, feminist students took over campuses and demanded an end to gender violence, sexual harassment, and sexist education (Miranda and Roque 2021). In Congress, feminist representatives founded the Feminist Caucus and established a Committee on Women and Gender Equality. Feminism in Chile was in the streets, in the universities, and increasingly within Congress, despite the relatively small numbers of women elected (Reyes-Housholder and Roque 2019).

The election of conventional delegates was crucial to advancing an electoral reform that would go beyond quotas and ensure gender parity. Women political scientists were at the forefront of the national debate because, as I argue here, we paradoxically benefited from our marginalization and thus the gendered division of labor in the discipline. Gender quotas, parity, and descriptive representation are treated as stereotypically feminine issues in political science, and male political scientists usually do not care about them. With two colleagues from the Red de Politólogas #NoSinMujeres (Network of Women Political Scientists #NotWithoutWomen), Javiera Arce and Carolina Garrido, I designed a mechanism that guaranteed that Chile would have the first Constitutional Assembly in the world with an equal number of men and women delegates.

Knowledge is Power

We—women of political science in Chile—research, read, and teach gender and politics. As a result, we know what worked in which country to promote women's representation and what did not work. We also know which arguments to use to explain to people the importance of inclusive democracies and the politics of presence (Phillips 1995). While usually dismissed by more established male political scientists, these issues became part of the national debate and were covered widely on TV programs, in op-eds, and in media interviews.

Based on previous research, we knew that closed-list proportional representation is typically associated with enhanced women's representation. However, the Chilean electoral system, with small districts in a highly fragmented political party system, would not be conducive to gender parity, even if we had managed to change from open to closed party lists for the election of Constitutional Assembly delegates. It was also challenging to implement closed lists in the middle of a profound crisis in political representation and abysmal distrust of political parties. A 2019 survey by the Centro de Estudios Públicos showed that only 2% of Chileans expressed trust in political parties, compared with 3% and 5% in the government and in Congress, respectively. Yet we knew that we had to improve the conditions for women candidates on open lists.

The system we designed raised the requirement to 50% women nominees in each district, alternating between men and women heading the party lists. In open-list preferential systems, heading the lists does not automatically translate into getting elected. However, there were reasons to believe this would help women's election, as people tend to vote more for candidates placed higher on the lists.

We were right. Seventy-six percent of the women elected were heads of their lists (Arce and Suárez-Cao 2021). This change may also have impacted other areas we had not considered at the time. Strikingly, there was no gap in campaign financing from political parties between male and female candidates in these elections. Unlike congressional elections (Piscopo et al. 2022), parties funded men and women equally (Le Foulon, Gazmuri, and Suárez-Cao 2021). For the first time, parties knew that women would be elected no matter what, and it seems they realized it was in their best interest to run competitive female candidates.

We were also aware that, because of the preferential voting system, it might not be sufficient to secure gender parity with these candidate provisions. Therefore, we proposed a seat assignment mechanism that guaranteed gender parity at the district level in relation to electoral outcomes. The list vote, the sum of each candidate's votes, determines the number of seats assigned to every list. Within lists and with the enhanced number of women candidates, we therefore focused on creating a mechanism to ensure that half the elected seats would go to women in each district.

This was a risky move. We had to argue and demonstrate that ensuring parity in the results did not alter the will of the voters, since this would mean that candidates' vote shares would not wholly determine their fate. We noted that this was in fact a long-standing trait of the Chilean electoral system, which combines vote by candidate and seat assignment by list. In 2017, for instance, in 93% of the districts, candidates who received fewer votes were elected to the detriment of more successful candidates whose lists did not gather enough overall support. Given that this was not a problem three years ago, we argued, why should it suddenly be a threat to democratic quality when a bill introduced gender corrections? Was it a matter of democracy and "one person, one vote," or a question of defending male privilege?

Gender and Politics as a Subordinated Field in the Discipline

I believe that we were successful thanks in large part to the existence of the Red de Politólogas, because of previous networking activities that we took as women to combat our marginalization in the discipline. This made us well positioned to form an advocacy group when the time was right. The Red de Politólogas is a network of women political scientists seeking to promote and make visible women's work in Latin American political science. It aims to strengthen cooperation efforts and contribute to improving pluralism, debate, and criticism in Latin America's academic and public discussions. Similarly, the network seeks to build bridges with journalists, organizers of scientific meetings, nongovernmental organizations, and other collective bodies looking for specialists in politics-related topics (Freidenberg and Suárez-Cao 2021).

The network thus gave us the institutional platform to ally with other women's organizations. We successfully argued in favor of gender parity thanks to a broad coalition of spokeswomen. Women parliamentarians ranging from the left to the center-right pushed the bill against the president's will, convinced their male colleagues to vote in favor of it, and took to the airwaves to defend the proposal. Women's organizations, feminist constitutional lawyers, and journalists rallied to claim #NuncaMasSinNosotras (#NeverAgainWithoutUs-Women).

The lobbying continued during the Constitutional Convention. The draft of the new constitution mandated gender parity in all elective and government positions, state institutions, and the judiciary. Despite the rejection of the draft constitution in the September 4, 2022, referendum, these provisions are highly popular. The Labor Barometer survey found that 70% of respondents stated that they "strongly agree" or "agree" with gender parity (*El Mostrador* 2022). Regardless of the ill fate of the draft, women political scientists contributed to making this issue visible in a country that, until a few years ago, was at the bottom of the rankings for women's representation in Latin America.

This serendipitous first-person experience opened my eyes to how power works in our discipline. Lisa Weeden (2004, 84) invites us to reflect upon "ways in which particular communities of argument operate in political science." Gendered expectations permeate what the field considers valid knowledge and valid problems. It is still primarily women political scientists who teach, read, and study gender. It most likely never occurred to men political scientists—"perniciously ignorant" (Dotson 2011) about gender—that by overlooking gender power dynamics, they might lack an understanding of how politics work. When the public forums demanded more gender equality, men lacked the knowledge to share expertise and thus could not engage in the conversation. Gender parity also spilled over into science funding in Chile, as the government recently mandated requirements for gender-balanced teams in applications to competitive research funding programs.

The lesson learned here is that political science and its impact in the real world would benefit from dismantling the gender divide. This is hardly a new realization (Carpenter 2007; Wahlke 1991). Strengthening gender mainstreaming across the field is required to fully grasp current political phenomena (Atchinson

2013, 233). The time for excluding gender is over, and we need to act now to ensure that it informs our teaching curriculum, research practices, and everyday dynamics of political science.

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