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Democracy Dies in Darkness

In Tunisia, more women in office can make all the difference

Electoral gender quotas can improve women's representation, even in democratizing and authoritarian regimes.

By **Lindsay J. Benstead**

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In Tunisia, 47 percent of seats in the [2018 municipal assembly elections](#) are now held by women. This increase is due in part to a constitutionally-mandated electoral gender quota.

Women are running for — and winning — elected office worldwide in ever greater numbers. A record number of women won seats in the [2018 U.S. midterm elections](#), and six women are running for the Democratic nomination for president in 2020. Women are also making strides electorally in nondemocratic regimes, including in Rwanda, which currently has the [highest proportion of women](#) worldwide in its legislature — 64 percent.

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Many question the value of this increased representation, however. Quotas, while a direct way of increasing the number of women in office, are not always seen as effective means of empowering women. This is especially the case in nondemocratic countries in which the parliament does not have an independent role in lawmaking. Some worry that rising numbers of women in office as a result of quotas in democratizing and authoritarian countries may do little more than

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In my recent article in the Journal of Middle East and Africa, I find that the election of women in Tunisia actually improved women's representation by increasing women's access to help with individual or community problems. I found similar evidence in Morocco and Algeria, but these findings also have implications beyond North Africa.

Who knows their municipal representatives?

I and a team of researchers at the Program on Governance and Local Development developed and implemented the Local Governance Performance Index (LGPI) and surveyed 3,600 Tunisian citizens in 18 municipalities about their experiences contacting members of municipal assemblies for help accessing health, education, and other public or private services. We conducted the survey in 2015, a few years after the uprisings that toppled Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in 2011 but before new municipal elections were held in Tunisia in 2018.

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The survey found that male citizens in Tunisia are much more likely than women to know, interact with and ask for help from a local government official — key avenues through which representation occurs. Twenty-nine percent of men and 16 percent of women responded that they know a local council member, while 17 percent of men and 11 percent of women had contacted a local councilor about a personal or community issue.

Why does it matter?

These gender gaps are important because they mean men — more often than women — are able to talk to their representatives about issues they and their communities care about. According to the LGPI survey, the most common issues that Tunisians spoke to their local council members about were regarding roads and government licenses. More than half of meetings between council members and citizens in Tunisia involved the citizen asking for help with roads or government documents. Housing made up 11 percent of requests, and electricity accounted for 9 percent. Less common requests included employment (7 percent), water (7 percent), health care (4 percent), transportation and telephone (2 percent, respectively), education (one percent), and other non-specified requests (12 percent). This lower interaction between women and elected officials when compared with men not only reduces their representation, but it may also play a role in explaining women's much lower rates of voting in Tunisia and other Arab countries.

How does electing women improve women's access to elected officials?

Gender gaps in access to local officials are due in large part to men's numerical dominance in office and network homosociality — close, trusting friendships and working relationships with others of the same gender. Bjarnegård argues that men have advantages accumulating homosocial capital — that is, predictable relationships with individuals who are similar and have resources needed to win elections — because of their numerical dominance in politics. Women's underrepresentation in government leads to lower rates of clientelistic service provision to women that can also limit the substantive representation of women's issues.

Gendered networks are key to understanding not only why women have less access to elected officials, but also why quotas reshape these networks and increase access to elected officials closer to gender parity. In Tunisia, men are more likely than women by a large margin to approach male council members. And the more that the request involves a larger issue for the community, rather than just an individual request, the more people tend to ask representatives of their same gender. However, electing or appointing women increased female access to help from councilors. Those differences were significant in multivariate tests, which also showed that electing women improved access for women but did not diminish access for men.

Even in democracies like the United States, gendered networks play a role in perpetuating gender gaps in politics, business and the arts. Female leaders were more likely than male leaders to hire women — evidence that gendered networks play a role in promoting — or hampering — women’s equal access to opportunities. The findings from Tunisia also shows that quotas improve women’s representation, especially in authoritarian and democratizing countries with weak parliaments or clientelistic politics. That men’s access did not diminish when women were elected suggests that in North Africa, as in consolidated democracies, promoting gender equity need not be considered a zero-sum game.

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