

The Dynamics of Political Representation: Examining Descriptive, Substantive, and Symbolic Representation with a Natural Experiment

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Overview

Because of the unusual lag between the passage of the quota law in 2009 and its implementation, the case of Uruguay provides a natural experiment to empirically validate the dynamic nature of representation. This study will examine how increases in the number of women in government influence the nature of political representation. More specifically, the introduction and implementation of Uruguay's quota law provides analytical leverage to isolate how increases in the numerical representation of women influence changes in policy responsiveness (substantive representation), as well as changes in symbolic representation.

The proposed project relies on a multi-methodological design. First, a four-wave panel survey of Uruguayan citizens will be designed and implemented to track changes in citizens' views of the quota law, as well as changes in citizens' attitudes towards politics and government and changes in citizens' political engagement and political activity. Second, a content analysis of news coverage will assess how the news media cover the introduction and implementation of the Uruguayan quota law. The content analysis will also investigate how the news media are covering the changing composition of the legislature and changes in the type of legislation passed in congress before and after the implementation of the quota. Finally, the behavior and attitudes of legislators will be studied with semi-structured interviews and content analyses of legislators' websites and speeches.

Intellectual Merit

This project will increase understanding of the dynamics of representation by untangling the causal connection between changes in descriptive representation, substantive representation, and symbolic representation. By focusing on one country over time, potentially confounding influences such as electoral system and political culture are held constant. Furthermore, by relying on the analytical leverage provided by this natural experiment, the project will allow the development and empirical testing of an original theory of political representation.

Broader Implications

This study has significant implications for academics and policy-makers alike that go far beyond Uruguay's borders. First, the project develops and tests a theoretical model assessing the dynamics of representation. Representation is a key component of the democratic process, and this work will heighten understanding of the process that can transform individuals into engaged, participatory citizens. Second, the project assesses the impact of increases in women's representation on policy debate and policy outcome, as well as on the public's political attitudes and political activity. Third, this work will have significant effects for policy-makers. Over 50 countries have legislated gender quotas—and many more have other mechanisms in place, like reserved seats or party quotas—and numerous countries are considering these types of measures to increase women's descriptive representation. Understanding the full effects of the increased descriptive representation of women that comes with an effective gender quota is a necessary component of an informed debate over these types of practices. Finally, women are better represented in political office than ever before, with mounting evidence of an upward trajectory. The proposed study examines how these changes alter the nature of representative democracy. In particular, the proposed study explores how these increases in the number of female political leaders influence both representatives and the represented.