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The Puzzle of Women's Underrepresentation in Brazil

...the underrepresentation of women is a persistent political fact of life in modern states, present across all types of institutional arrangements and cultures. It is one of the few generalizations that it is safe to make about the position of women (Lovenduski 2005, 45).

In 2010, Brazil elected its first woman president, joining Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, and a handful of other nations in electing a female head of state. President Dilma Rousseff was reelected in 2014, in a contest that saw two other female contenders including Marina Silva, globally renowned environmentalist. But such prominent female leaders constitute noteworthy exceptions in a predominantly masculine formal political realm. And in 2016, the Brazilian Congress—one of the world's most male dominant legislatures—voted to impeach Rousseff. With just under ten percent women in its lower house of parliament, Brazil is ranked a lowly 154th of 193 countries, deviating from an impressive regional trend—seven Latin American democracies have over 30 percent women in their legislature (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2017).

Why do so few Brazilian women hold electoral office? This book explains women's limited presence in formal politics in Brazil, situating the pattern of underrepresentation within a broader "crisis of representation" undermining the quality of democracy in both recent and established democracies. It examines how the category and process of gender are embedded throughout political institutions, chronicling how gendered party structures, electoral rules, and voters interact to marginalize women and other traditional outsiders in Brazil's formal political sphere. In explicitly considering the intersection of gender and race, this book engages the political participation of white and non-white women, thus departing from the inadequate norm of universalizing the experiences of white women (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1989, 1995; Young

1989).¹ It documents how Brazil's few female politicians have managed to defy the odds, and offers suggestions for mitigating the country's crisis of representation.

The book's major claim is that two important manifestations of that crisis—the weak institutionalization of parties and party systems and the underrepresentation of women and other marginalized populations (Jones 2010)—are related. It engages the issue of women's representation in Brazil (the third wave of democratization's most populous democracy) to explain how weakly institutionalized parties² undermine the representativeness of formal politics. It contends that weakly institutionalized parties are ill-equipped to provide the psychological, organizational, and material support necessary to mitigate the persistent gender gap in formal political power. In contrast, well-institutionalized parties operate as an organization, according to clearly defined rules of the game, and have at their disposal a host of material and human resources that they can marshal to cultivate, recruit, and support viable female candidacies.

The enduring political marginalization of women and minoritized groups despite widespread democratization has led to extensive discussions in the academic and policy worlds alike about the causes and consequences of women's underrepresentation. Yet the dilemma in Brazil confounds the conventional wisdom—a dearth of female candidates and deputies persists in spite of substantial socioeconomic progress, effective and dynamic women's movements, an electorate increasingly receptive to female politicians, and the 1998 implementation of a women's quota law stipulating that political parties reserve at least thirty percent of the spaces on their legislative candidate lists for women. Just 51 of Brazil's 513 federal deputies are female, with only four of those women identifying as Black.³ While Brazil is certainly not unique in marginalizing women from formal politics, its level of underrepresentation is more pronounced than conventional wisdom would expect.

¹ When I employ the words “women” or “female,” I am referring to the diverse experiences of the wide array of individuals that identify as women. Yet in recognition of the failure of many studies and policies targeting “women” to speak to women of color (Crenshaw 1995; Hughes 2011), where data permit I examine the often stark differences across white women and Afro-descendant women. As evidenced by the evolving ways in which the Brazilian census (un)sees racial identities, the question of data availability is itself interwoven into political projects to reproduce power and privilege and consolidate the nation-state (Reiter and Mitchell 2010).

² As developed further in Chapters 2 and 4, weakly institutionalized parties lack lasting societal ties, with limited “value infusion” (Janda 1980) and stability (Huntington 1968), have minimal organizational cohesiveness or “internal systemness” (Panebianco 1988), and are susceptible to personalist politics (Mainwaring 1999).

³ To be elaborated below and further discussed in Chapter 7, racial identity in Brazil is complex and belies clear dichotomization (Bailey and Telles n.d.; Caldwell 2007; Loveman, Muniz, and Bailey 2012). Ten of the 51 women elected in 2014 self-identify as “parda” (brown) or “preta” (black), which government sources and activists often lump together as “negro” or “Afro-descendant.” Yet when the racial binary is imposed, just 4 of those 10 Afro-descendant women consider themselves a part of the Black caucus.

The Women's Movements

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This book explains the puzzle of women's extreme underrepresentation in Brazil. I discuss how the country's electoral rules disadvantage women and thwart the effectiveness of its gender quota, and then examine party characteristics that lend additional explanatory power, especially helpful for understanding the substantial variation in women's prospects across parties. I contend that it is the weakly institutionalized and male-dominant character of most Brazilian parties that has hindered women's political prospects and limited their pathways to power. I find that the intraparty competition in Brazil's candidate-centered elections and the preponderance of inchoate parties have maintained women's political marginalization, and conclude that to effectively promote women's participation, parties must have both the capacity to recruit and provide female political aspirants with essential psychological, organizational, and material support (forthcoming in well-institutionalized parties) and the will to do so (heralded by women in party leadership).

In this introductory chapter, I briefly contextualize the puzzle of women's underrepresentation in Brazil, and introduce the central research questions, research design, and data, and the relevance and contributions advanced herein. I then conclude by previewing the ensuing chapters.

THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS

The continued underrepresentation of women in Brazil is particularly puzzling given the strength and breadth of the country's women's movements and general presence of women throughout social movements. Women were active participants in the Amnesty and *Diretas-Já* (Direct Elections Now) movements of the 1970s and 1980s, and played a significant role throughout the (re)democratization process in Brazil (Alvarez 1990). Women also had a critical presence in the black movement, with Afro-descendant women forging autonomous black women's organizations throughout the country (Caldwell 2007; Carneiro 1999). The forceful and consequential presence of women in the Constitutional Assembly of 1987–88 led them to be considered one of “the most organized sector[s] of civil society” (Costa 2008; Macaulay 2006). Indeed, the *bancada feminina* (women's caucus) unified female politicians and activists across party lines, achieving approval for an impressive 80 percent of the proposals laid out in the “Carta das Mulheres aos Constituintes” (Women's Letter to the Members of the Constituent Assembly) (Pinto 1994).

Preparation for and follow-up to the United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 led nearly 800 Brazilian women's organizations to coalesce under a “cohesive feminist platform” and advance the “Declaração das Mulheres Brasileiras à IV Conferência” (Declaration of Brazilian Women to the Fourth Conference) (Costa 2008). In recent years, activists have rallied around the National Plan of Policies for Women (PNPM), a comprehensive set of objectives and specific proposals for advancing women's rights. In 2007,

with the participation of then President Lula, several members of his cabinet, and politicians and activists from throughout South America, 2,559 delegates elected from over 600 local and regional councils advanced the Second PNPM, which was subsequently approved by executive decree on March 5, 2008 (Special Secretariat for Policies for Women 2010).

The *bancada feminina* continues to unify female legislators, most recently using their “suprapartisan” orientation to influence debates over the political reform proposals under consideration (see Figure 1.1). Michel Temer, then president of the Chamber of Deputies and now acting president of Brazil, declared, “The *bancada feminina* is one of the most active and present in political activity and knows how to defend its causes, make a presence, and make demands” (Temer 2009, 3). In sum, women have enjoyed considerable success in both articulating and actualizing their demands, thus rendering quite conspicuous their absence from the highest echelons of political decision-making.

SOCIOECONOMIC PROGRESS

The near exclusion of Brazilian women from formal politics persists in spite of impressive progress on the fronts of education, literacy, and presence in the



FIGURE 1.1 The *Bancada Feminina* Mobilizing in Favor of Inclusive Political Reforms (2015)

Favorable Public Opinion

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workforce (Htun 2002). As of 2010, women are 59.8% of college graduates, have on average 1.1 more years of schooling than men, and represent 43.6% of the workforce and 45% of the three lowest tiers of federal government posts (Special Secretariat for Policies for Women 2010). Moreover, the Order of Attorneys of Brazil (OAB) indicates that 50.5% of registered attorneys are women. Men still drastically outnumber women in political office, however, comprising more than 10 times the number of federal representatives than women. As shown in Table 1.1, with just 10 percent women in its national congress, Brazil remains stymied as Latin America's most male-dominant legislature (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2017).⁴

FAVORABLE PUBLIC OPINION

Further confounding the extreme underrepresentation of women is the postulated support of the electorate. In recent public opinion polls, Brazilians have responded rather favorably to the prospect of female politicians.⁵ A nationally representative survey conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion and Statistics (Ibope) in February 2009⁶ found that 94% of respondents would vote for a woman, 83% believed that “women in politics and other spaces can improve politics and these spaces,” 75% agreed that “true democracy exists only with the presence of women in spaces of power,” and 73% concurred that “the Brazilian population wins with the election of a greater number of women.” When asked explicitly about the offices for which respondents would support female candidates, 66% of 2,002 respondents indicated they would vote for a woman for any office or federal deputy in particular. Levels of agreement to a subsequent question about hypothetical support for an Afro-Brazilian woman reached 80.2% (Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion and Statistics 2009).⁷ So although machismo and racism are interwoven into Brazilian society, survey data demonstrate a postulated receptiveness to white and Afro-descendant female candidates among most Brazilians varying only slightly by respondent sex.

⁴ The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) data for Brazil tally the women currently serving as federal deputy, including those not initially elected but subsequently assuming a substitute role based on their list ranking. As such, the figure departs minimally from the database used for analysis throughout this book, which is based on electoral returns.

⁵ This is not to negate the persistence of machismo in Brazil. Of 2,365 women and 1,181 men surveyed in a nationally representative sample, just 5% of women and men stated that machismo did not exist in Brazil, with 67% and 58%, respectively, indicating that machismo was extensive (Fundação Perseu Abramo 2010).

⁶ It is important to note that these surveys were conducted prior to the emergence of Dilma Rousseff's candidacy for the presidency.

⁷ Presuming Afro-descendant women are included in respondents' understanding of “woman” in the prior question, the higher level of agreement when asked explicitly about an Afro-descendant female candidate is suggestive of the social desirability bias likely at work in such survey questions (Streb et al. 2008).

TABLE 1.1 *Women's Parliamentary Presence in American Electoral Democracies (2017)*

Rank	Country	% Women in Lower House
2	Bolivia	53.1%
5	Nicaragua	45.7%
8	Mexico	42.6%
15	Argentina	38.9%
19	Ecuador	38.0%
27	Costa Rica	35.1%
37	El Salvador	32.1%
53	Peru	27.7%
58	Dominican Republic	26.8%
62	Canada	26.3%
101	United States	19.3%
105	Colombia	18.7%
107	Panama	18.3%
129	Chile	15.8%
134	Paraguay	13.8%
141	Guatemala	12.7%
154	Brazil	10.7%

Sources: Freedom House (2016); Inter-Parliamentary Union (2017)

Table 1.2 displays the percentage of respondents who, in the 2010–2014 wave of the World Values Survey (WVS), *strongly agreed* with the statement “men make better politicians than women,” in several electoral democracies around the world (World Values Survey 1981–2014). It also includes 2017 data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) on the percentage of women in the lower house of parliament for those 33 countries. As we can see in Table 1.2, public opinion on women in politics in Brazil suggests an electorate that is rather receptive to women politicians. Ranking 13th of 33 electoral democracies (5th of 8 in Latin America and tied with Germany), many countries exhibit far more prohibitive levels of bias against women than does Brazil. Clearly, public opinion toward women cannot explain the striking underrepresentation of women in Brazilian politics.

When asked about the particular gains a greater female presence would bring, 7 in 10 Brazilian respondents cited greater honesty, competence, administrative capacity, and commitment to voters, the very traits that

TABLE 1.2 A Cross-National Glimpse at Voter Bias in Electoral Democracies

Rank	Country	% Male Sup	% Wmn in Leg	Rank	Country	% Male Sup	% Wmn in Leg
1	Netherlands	1.4	36.0	18	Chile	8.3	15.8
2	Uruguay	2.3	20.2	19	Cyprus	9.7	17.9
3	Slovenia	2.5	36.7	20	South Korea	10.6	17.0
4	New Zealand	3.1	34.2	21	Ecuador	12.1	38.0
5	Sweden	3.3	43.6	22	Estonia	15.9	26.7
6	United States	3.4	19.3	23	Romania	16.3	20.7
7	Japan	3.7	9.5	24	South Africa	19.6	41.5
8	Peru	4.1	27.7	25	Ukraine	21.5	12.3
9	Spain	4.3	39.1	26	Georgia	25.5	16.0
10	Australia	4.9	28.7	27	Philippines	27.3	29.5
11	Colombia	5.4	18.7	28	India	30.7	11.8
12	Mexico	6.2	42.6	29	Turkey	32.0	14.6
13	Brazil	6.7	10.7	30	Pakistan	42.6	20.6
13	Germany	6.7	37.0	31	Ghana	44.3	12.7
15	Trinidad and Tobago	7.5	31.0	32	Tunisia	45.0	31.3
16	Argentina	8.0	38.9	33	Nigeria	46.6	5.6
16	Poland	8.0	28.0				

Notes: % Male Sup = % Strongly Agreeing with Male Political Superiority; %Wmn in Leg = % Women in Legislature.
Sources: Inter-Parliamentary Union (2017); World Values Survey (1981–2014); Freedom House (2016)

a majority of electors claimed to evaluate when choosing a candidate (Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion and Statistics 2009). Perhaps most striking is the finding that 78 percent of respondents agree (fully or in part) that it should be *mandatory* for *half* of all legislative candidates to be women (Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion and Statistics 2013). Moreover, in Brazil’s 2010 and 2014 presidential elections, 66.2 and 64.5 percent of voters, respectively, cast a vote for a woman, leading to the election and reelection of Dilma Rousseff, Brazil’s first female president.⁸ Despite this propensity of the Brazilian electorate to support female candidates, most parties, as we shall see, have failed to stimulate and support their candidacies, leaving women woefully underrepresented.

⁸ The two other female candidates contesting the presidency were two former *petistas*, Marina Silva (with the PV in 2010 and PSB in 2014) and Luciana Genro (with the PSOL in 2014).

ELECTORAL RULES

Many are quick to dismiss Brazil's underrepresentation of women as a result of its pairing of the gender quota with open-list proportional representation (OLPR). While the combination is far from ideal, as detailed in Chapter 3, other nations with similar quotas, electoral systems, and cultural contexts have made significantly greater progress. In order to understand the failure of the gender quota—and indeed, to understand the successes and shortcomings of any institution—we must consider how they interact with the sociopolitical contexts in which they are embedded. Electoral rules do not exist in a vacuum, with the party system and historical tendencies of parties therein being particularly salient (Kittilson 2013; Krook 2009; Lovenduski 1998, 2005). I illustrate the challenges posed by OLPR and related inadequacies of the quota in detail in Chapter 3, but below quickly preview the background and explanation of the quota's limitations.

Seeking to emulate Argentina's success with its groundbreaking gender quota,⁹ and build on the international momentum surrounding women's empowerment resulting from the upcoming Beijing Conference on Women, deputies Marta Suplicy and Paulo Bernardo introduced a proposal to implement a gender quota in proportional elections.¹⁰ As will be discussed further in Chapter 3, these deputies foresaw the difficulties inherent in enforcing a gender quota in Brazil's electoral context, and therefore proposed additional measures intended to facilitate its earnest implementation. Just two weeks after the close of the Beijing Conference, Brazil approved the law, but without the additional measures, resulting in a watered down version of the initial proposal (Araújo 1999; Marx, Borner, and Camionotti 2007; Suplicy 1996) and a typical instance of layered institutional change (Thelen 1999).

Thus, in contrast to the experiences of neighboring countries, including others with OLPR elections, Brazil's electoral quota law and subsequent revisions (9.100/1995, 9.504/1997, 12.034/2009) have been unable to mitigate the gender gap in political power (Araújo 2001a; Wylie and dos Santos 2016). The countries that have enjoyed the most success with women's electoral quotas are those with closed-list proportional representation systems, which allow the parties to establish the list ranking with consideration of the candidate quotas and to alternate candidates by sex (Tripp and Kang 2008).¹¹ In OLPR elections, because the electors rather than the parties decide the position of candidates on the lists, a party could advance a list with 30 percent female candidates and not elect a single woman. Yet as I discuss in Chapter 3, Brazil ranks the lowest in women's representation of all countries with OLPR voting.

⁹ In 1991, women were 5.4% of the Argentine Chamber of Deputies; ten years after the full implementation of the quota, they had reached 29.2% (Marx, Borner, and Camionotti 2007).

¹⁰ Interview with Senator Marta Suplicy, June 2015.

¹¹ There exists significant variation in the rules and enforcement of alternation.

Electoral Rules

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While the structural flaws in the Brazilian quota law render it a poor fit for its electoral system, they are only part of the explanation of its spectacular failure to induce genuine change. Brazil ranks the lowest in women's representation of all countries with OLPR voting, and has the 6th lowest proportion of women legislators of the 77 countries with legislated gender quotas or reserved seats, indicating that other factors are clearly at play. I contend that Brazil's preponderance of weakly institutionalized parties—incentivized by its electoral rules—has instilled a norm of non-compliance,¹² facilitating an environment in which formal laws such as the quota are regularly flouted, with earnest party compliance¹³ with the quota stipulations remaining the exception.¹⁴ The failure of parties to reach the 30 percent threshold is certainly in part due to the language of the quota law, which until a 2009 “mini-reform” (12.034/2009), only required parties to *reserve* vacancies for women. But even with that institutional change mandating that parties actually *fill* 30% of their candidate lists with women¹⁵—leading to a 51% increase in the overall percentage of female contenders in the 2010 elections (up to 19.1% from 12.7% in 2006)—a mere 25.4% of parties complied with the strengthened quota.¹⁶

In 2014, just under half (48.6%) of state parties contesting the Chamber of Deputies elections advanced at least 30% female candidates, with *nearly a third of state parties* (30.7%) *not running a single female candidate* (see Table 1.3). While parties often use coalition partners to meet the quota target (dos Santos n.d.), in the end, just 56.7% of state coalitions met the 30% target. Tellingly, the percentage of coalition lists reaching 35% female candidates drops to 27.7% (Tribunal Superior Eleitoral 1994–2016). After more than a decade of parties neglecting what was essentially a toothless quota law, it had become entrenched

¹² To be elaborated in Chapter 2, the expectation of a norm of (non)compliance draws from the international organizations literature, which has found that states' internal institutional constraints (or lack thereof) affect their probability of (non)compliance with rarely enforced international laws (Dixon 1993; Simmons 1998).

¹³ The notion of a norm of non-compliance speaks to violations of both the letter and the spirit of the law. Yet because the latter is difficult to measure systematically, in what follows, I treat quota compliance as formally meeting the legal target (i.e., post-2009 mini reform, party list comprising at least 30 percent women). That treatment is imperfect, since major parties may use smaller coalition partners' contributions to the coalition list to meet the quota (dos Santos n.d.).

¹⁴ Across all state parties contesting the 1998–2010 Chamber of Deputies elections, the rate of quota compliance for Chamber of Deputies elections was 16.1%, ranging from 5.6% (PP) to 39.0% (PC do B). Beyond the PC do B, the most compliant parties (meeting the quota target more than 20% of the time) were small, uncompetitive leftist parties (PCO, PSTU).

¹⁵ The mini-reform requires that 30% of the candidates actually advanced are women. Prior to the reform, the language stipulated that they reserve—but not fill—30% of candidate slots for women. The gender binary reinforcing law is characterized as “gender neutral,” meaning candidate lists can have no more than 70% of “either sex.”

¹⁶ Despite credible threats of enforcement by the Tribunal Superior Eleitoral in Brasília (Agência de Notícias da Justiça Eleitoral 2010b; Coelho and Costa 2010), several regional electoral courts chose not to enforce the quota (e.g., Agência de Notícias da Justiça Eleitoral 2010a). For further discussion of the failure of this institutional reform, see Wylie and dos Santos (2016).

TABLE 1.3 *Proportion of State Parties Complying with 30 Percent Gender Quota, by Party (2014)*

Party	Proportion of State Parties Running 30%+ Women Candidates (2014)
<i>LEFT</i>	0.57 (0.50)
PCdoB	0.64 (0.49)
PCB	0.60 (0.51)
PCO	0.20 (0.45)
PDT	0.38 (0.50)
PPS	0.36 (0.49)
PSB	0.56 (0.51)
PSOL	0.70 (0.47)
PSTU	0.77 (0.43)
PT	0.56 (0.51)
PV	0.56 (0.51)
<i>CENTER</i>	0.56 (0.50)
PMDB	0.48 (0.51)
PSDB	0.64 (0.49)
<i>RIGHT</i>	0.45 (0.50)
DEM	0.41 (0.50)
PEN	0.40 (0.50)
PHS	0.44 (0.51)
PMN	0.64 (0.49)
PP	0.44 (0.51)
PPL	0.41 (0.50)
PR	0.41 (0.50)
PRB	0.48 (0.51)
PROS	0.44 (0.51)
PRP	0.40 (0.50)
PRTB	0.35 (0.49)
PSC	0.54 (0.51)
PSD	0.37 (0.49)
PSDC	0.30 (0.47)
PSL	0.67 (0.48)
PT do B	0.48 (0.51)
PTB	0.58 (0.50)
PTC	0.39 (0.50)
PTN	0.41 (0.50)
SD	0.38 (0.50)
TOTAL	0.49 (0.50)

Note: Standard deviation in parentheses