

The Case for Democracy:

Does Democracy Promote Gender Equality?

Scientific evidence shows:

- **High levels of democracy and education promote egalitarian gender attitudes. Gender equality is much more likely to be the norm in democratic countries.**
- **Electoral autocracies embrace gender equality reforms to boost their international image, but fail to deliver necessary democratic reforms.**
- **Accountability mechanisms associated with free and fair elections have demonstrable effects on women’s well-being.**
- **Gender quotas are key to advancing women’s representation in parliament, but they do not lead to more democracy.**

Democracy Promotes Egalitarian Gender Attitudes

Democracy is intrinsically linked to gender equality (Wang et al. 2017). There is strong evidence that development of democratic institutions goes hand in hand with the rise of women in public life (Welzel, Norris, and Inglehart 2002). This in part has to do with attitudinal change.

Recent findings demonstrate that gender equality is much more likely to be the norm in democratic countries. Minimally democratic countries have on average 33% lower levels of egalitarian gender attitudes compared to fully democratic countries. Hybrid and authoritarian regimes, by contrast, have over 60% lower levels (Zagreбина 2020).

Relatedly, evidence shows that higher levels of education promote egalitarian gender attitudes but only in democratic societies; education is less likely to change attitudes on gender in non-democratic societies (Zagreбина 2020). For example, in China – as a recent study shows – the broad expansion of higher education poses an insignificant effect on gender attitudes (Wang 2022).

When countries democratize, it is thus critical to increase access to good quality education to raise women’s political awareness and participation.

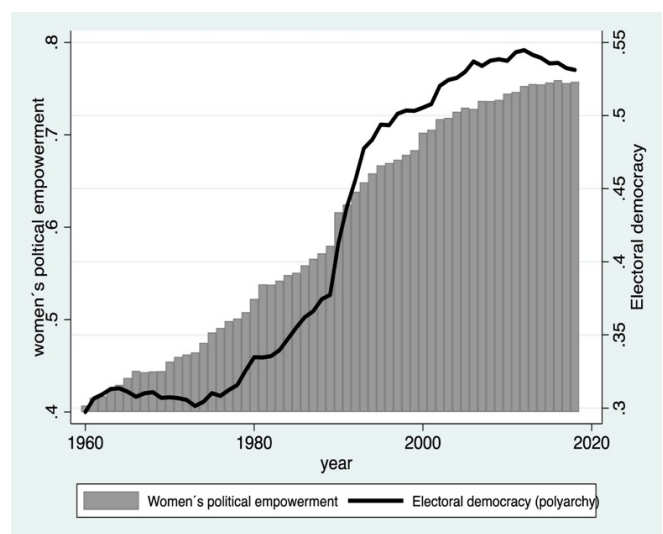
Democratic Institutions Promote Gender Equality

Equality of all before the law is a central aspect of democracies, and an example of how democracies provide institutional functions and mechanisms that “autogenerate” promotion of real gender equality.

Women’s electoral representation promotes gender equality. A recent study showed that the presence of a female president significantly increases the frequency of female parliamentary speech making leading to women’s political empowerment (Wahman, Frantzeskakis and Yildirim 2021). Benefits of female leadership are manifold. For instance, the presence of women as heads of state not only shapes people’s views on women in politics positively, but also increases their level of political engagement (Alexander and Jalalzai 2020).

Electoral institutions have gender effects. Research shows that proportional representation systems produce fewer

FIGURE 1. THE TRENDS IN WOMEN’S POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT AND ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY, 1960-2018



Source: Hornset and de Soysa (2022).

obstacles to women's representation (Thames 2017). Gender quotas are pivotal too. Studies show that citizens in countries with gender quotas succeed in raising awareness about female underrepresentation leading to stronger support for female participation (Fernández and Valiente 2021). Electoral gender quotas have long-term effects on political parties forcing them to change their candidate eligibility pool, thereby increasing legislative diversity.

Evidence also shows that greater vertical accountability through institutions like elections produces better gender equality in other spheres of society. Free and fair elections are linked to higher life expectancy for women, more gender equality in educational attainments, higher participation in society and in the labor force (Beer 2009). Electoral democracy, when accompanied by effective governance, also has indirect effects on women's health. Fully-fledged democracies have (on average) 94% lower infant mortality than closed dictatorships (Wang, Mechkova, and Andersson 2019).

Autocracies Manipulate Gender Quotas

The advancement of women's rights and representation is typically key in democracy promotion efforts. Yet, there is a

reason for caution in autocracies. Research findings show that autocracies support gender equality *de jure* to boost regime legitimacy or advance other agendas (Donno and Kreft 2019). While the adoption of gender quotas has dramatically increased in electoral autocracies, this does not translate to more democracy. Boosting women's parliamentary representation has come at the cost of electoral integrity and human rights in Rwanda (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2022). Gender quotas often fail to deliver parity among candidates due to weak implementation and lack of enforcement mechanisms.

It is particularly party-based autocracies, such as Rwanda, that advance women's rights and capitalize on them to increase the support base, compared to military and other types of autocratic regimes (Donno and Kreft 2019). Increasing formal representation in political institutions and proclamations of the rights of women in such autocracies obfuscates the lack of real democratic progress. For example, in Cameroon, compliance with international norms on gender equality has helped President Paul Biya's regime secure donor funds, while "rigging elections and limiting the activities of opposition parties" (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2022: 69).

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