

Chapter 15: Electoral Systems

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Do Proportional Electoral Systems Facilitate Women's Political Inclusion?

1. Introduction

Do proportional electoral systems have different effects on women than men? Classic scholarship makes a convincing case that electoral systems have profound effects on representation, shaping the strength and the number of elected parties and the extent to which citizens participate in politics. However, this literature has traditionally ignored the question of *who* is elected, and *who* participates in politics under different electoral systems. If proportional electoral systems facilitate electability of small parties and foster turnout, then which social groups are more likely to be included in proportional electoral systems?

Understanding *who* is elected and *who* participates in politics is of utmost importance. Including all social groups and their intersection is a democratic essential. It ensures that everyone's, including the voices and perspectives of the most marginalized, are heard and considered (Celis and Childs 2024). When all social groups are included, politics is less alienating for fewer people (Hughes 2013) and decisions are most likely to be deemed legitimate by others (Clayton et al 2019), ultimately improving everyone's democratic satisfaction and quality of representation.

In the last few decades, gender scholars ask whether the effects of electoral systems can affect women and men differently and whether different women could be affected differently (e.g. Krook 2018; Hughes 2013, 2016). Women have been traditionally underrepresented in legislatures across the globe, whilst facing de facto barriers that restrict their political engagement and participation (e.g. Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2010, 2012; Morgan-Collins 2024a). Could it be that proportional electoral systems can facilitate women's incorporation into politics? And if so, can all women benefit from proportional systems the same?

This chapter synthesizes extant gender scholarship that seeks to uncover whether a well-designed electoral system can facilitate incorporation of women into politics. The chapter defines electoral systems in a traditional, somewhat narrow, sense that focuses primarily on how votes are translated into seats. This means that electoral reforms defined in a broader sense, such as those that implement gender quotas, is outside the scope of this chapter and addressed elsewhere (Krook 2014; 2018). The chapter introduces the reader to the literature on electoral systems in four steps.

The chapter opens by taking a fresh look at the state of women's political inclusion across the globe today. Using the most recent global data, the chapter demonstrates that women as a group continue to be systematically undermobilized in politics as voters, citizens and politicians, but that this undermobilization occurs less frequently countries with proportional electoral systems. Taking a close country-by-country look at the data, the chapter then points to several non-conforming outliers where electoral systems do not seem to work in the anticipated way.

Second, the chapter synthesizes extant research on why scholars expect proportional systems to facilitate political incorporation of women, as well as which sub-groups of women are most likely to be affected. The cumulative evidence from cross-sectional, case study and mixed designs largely points towards the same conclusion: proportional electoral systems are typically associated with greater political inclusion of women of all backgrounds, although proportional electoral systems can sometimes have no, small or even adverse effects.

Third, the chapter argues that the mixed findings in the literature may reflect the impact of cultural, political and socio-economic context and the methodological challenges faced by scholars. Whether electoral systems can effectively foster women's political inclusion can be shaped by how many women are already included, how restrictive are social norms about women's inclusion, how competitive politics already is and how often men participate in politics. But even if we account for contextual factors, scholars can arrive at different conclusions because of the methodological choices they make. At least some of the mixed findings in the literature reflect the way scholars address the multifaceted nature of electoral systems, how they identify their effects, and how they measure key concepts.

The chapter concludes by reflecting on the extent to which scholars have reached a consensus about the ways electoral systems shape women's political inclusion. In many ways, the chapter "restores" the idea that proportional electoral systems can be a helpful institutional tool to facilitate women's political inclusion. At the same time, the chapter makes the argument that policymakers must be very careful to design systems that are known to be most effective, consider the impact on women of all backgrounds as well as the context in which the system is applied.

2. Women's Political Inclusion in Different Electoral Systems Across the Globe Today

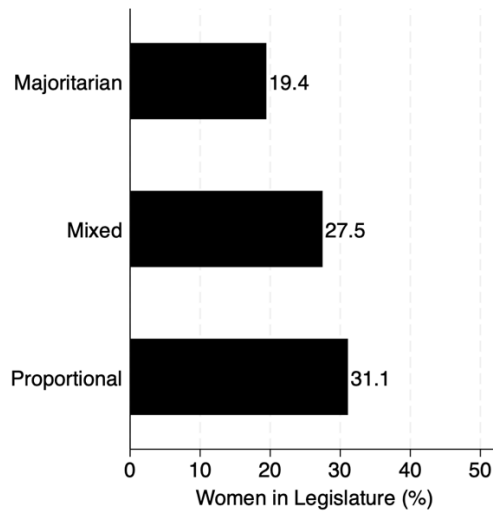
This chapter first reviews the most recent global data to examine bivariate relationships between the type of an electoral systems and the extent to which women are incorporated into politics as politicians, voters and citizens. Traditionally, scholars have studied the effects of electoral systems on women's political inclusion in Western or democratic countries before 2000. This trend raises the question of whether the findings uncovered in canonical studies bare relevance to more recent periods across the globe. In this section, the chapter therefore explores the most recent global data spanning both democracies and non-democracies.

For the purposes of this analysis, the chapter classifies electoral systems into three main categories - proportional, majoritarian or mixed. *Proportional* electoral systems implement a proportional formula in multi-member districts, where seats are allocated to parties/candidates in proportion to votes received. *Majoritarian* electoral systems implement a majoritarian formula in single or multi-member districts, where seats are allocated to parties/candidates with the most votes. *Mixed* electoral systems fall somewhere in between the two, as they combine both proportional and majoritarian formulas.

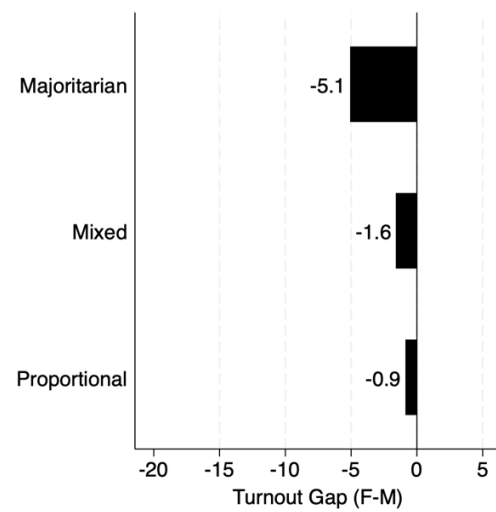
The relationship between electoral system types and women's political association is presented in Figure 1. As the figure shows, women continue to participate overwhelmingly less often in politics as citizens, voters and politician across the globe today. Consistent with canonical studies, gender gaps in political inclusion between women and men tend to be narrower in countries that use proportional electoral systems.

Figure 1: Electoral System Types and Gender Gaps

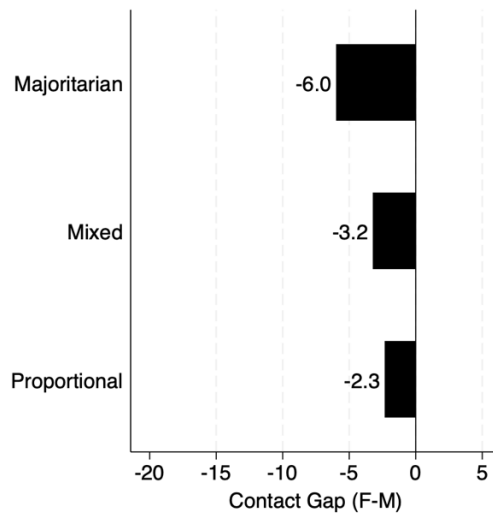
a) Politicians – Electability



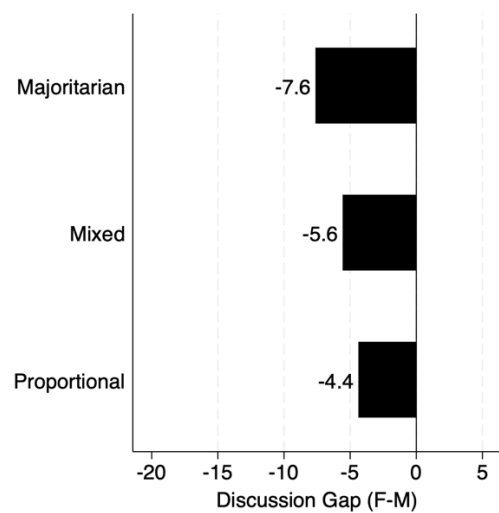
b) Voters – Participation



c) Citizens – Participation



d) Citizens – Engagement



Notes: Data sourced from Data sourced from IPU Parline Dataset (October 2024); World Value Survey, Wave 7 (2017-2022) and IDEA Electoral System Design Database (November 2024). The turnout gap is defined as a percentage point gap between women and men reporting that they *always* vote in national elections. The contact gap is defined as a percentage point gap between women and men reporting that they *have* contacted government official. The discussion gap is defined as a percentage point gap between women and men reporting that they *frequently* discuss politics with friends.

The most recent global data shows that whilst women politicians achieve near parity (above 45%) with men in 16 countries across the globe, the average proportion of women in national legislatures is never higher than a third across all the electoral system types (Figure 1a). However, the average proportion of women politicians is markedly higher in countries with proportional systems than in majoritarian systems (31.1% vs 19.4%). In turn, women citizens continue to be less likely to report that they *always* vote in most of the surveyed countries. Women are also less likely to report that they *have contacted a politician* and that they

frequently discuss politics with friends in a vast majority of surveyed countries. However, the gender turnout gap is almost eliminated (-0.9 percentage points) in countries that use proportional systems (Figure 1b), and the average gender contact and discussion gaps in countries with proportional systems are approximately half the size of gender gaps in countries with majoritarian systems (Figures 1c,d).

At the same time, it is important to emphasize that the relationships reported in Figure 1 are far from deterministic, as we observe several non-conforming countries where proportional electoral systems do not seem to facilitate women's political inclusion, or where women are successfully incorporated in countries with majoritarian electoral systems. Of course, without a more thorough analysis, we cannot exclude the possibility that the relationships presented in Figure 1 are confounded by other factors. For example, women may be more deeply incorporated into politics in countries with greater political freedoms that are also more likely to have proportional electoral systems. The possibility seems less likely given that the very same patterns between electoral systems and women's inclusion are observed regardless of the country's freedom status (Appendix Figure 1).

In the following sections, we therefore delve deeper into the question of when we should expect proportional systems to work, how and why, and explore when proportional systems may not matter or even when they may manifest adverse effects.

3. Why Do Scholars Expect Electoral Systems to Shape Women's Political Inclusion?

The idea that proportional electoral systems can favor women candidates emerged at about the same time as proportional systems spread across Western Europe. When parties have control over nomination of multiple candidates in a district – which is more typically the case in proportional electoral systems – the perceived electoral loss from nominating women and displacing men incumbents is lessened, whilst the incentives to broaden appeals to more groups are strengthened (Krook 2018; Krook and Schwindt-Bayer 2013; Krook and Moser 2013; Matland 2005; Rule 1987). These trends may apply especially for ethnic minority women candidates that can appeal to both women and ethnic minorities (Barker and Coffe 2018; Hughes 2016).

Others suggest that women may be more likely to seek nomination in proportional systems. Perhaps women candidates place higher value on work-life balance, diversity initiatives of gatekeepers, less competition and less conflict (Coffee and Davidson-Schmich 2020; also see Thesen and Yildirim 2023), all of which may be more favorable for women in proportional systems that typically place lesser emphasis on individual candidates.

More recently, scholars also suggest that proportional systems can facilitate women's political participation more broadly. Perhaps proportional systems signal that the system is open to women, thus increasing the likelihood that women engage in politics (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2010; 2012). Inducing greater electoral competition, proportional systems may also prompt parties to mobilize women in elections (Skorge 2023; Teele 2023; Tambe and Jormfeldt 2025), especially women that face the most severe cultural and structural barriers to voting (Morgan-Collins 2024a,b).

The evidence that proportional electoral systems facilitate political inclusion of women, including the most marginalized women, however, is often mixed. In some cases, scholars report no or even adverse effects of proportional systems. In this section, this chapter first

synthesizes this body of scholarly knowledge and then delves deeper into why scholars can sometimes report mixed findings.

3.1. Do Proportional Electoral Systems Foster Women's Chances of Getting Elected?

For the past four decades, scholars have systematically documented that countries with proportional electoral systems tend to elect more women. Whilst the first cross-national studies mostly focused on Western democracies and studied women as a group (Caul 1999; Rule 1987; Matland and Studlar 1996; McAlister and Studlar 2002; Salmond 2006; Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005), the second wave of cross-national studies broadened its scope geographically (Kenworthy and Malami 1999; Kostadinova 2007; Paxton 1997; Paxton et al 2010; Reynolds 1999; Thames 2017; Tripp and Kang 2008; Yoon 2004) and, more recently, also intersectionally (Holmsten et al 2010; Hughes 2011, 2016).

The cross-sectional nature of these studies raises the question to what extent their findings reflect factors other than electoral systems. Aiming to overcome these concerns, several studies exploit within-country variation in electoral systems, thus addressing the concern that the positive relationship between electoral systems and women's political inclusion in cross-sectional studies is spurious.

Most recently, Högström (2025) analyses 94 countries and finds that the proportion of women in legislatures increased in countries that switched from majoritarian to mixed systems. Comparing the effects of four electoral reforms to culturally and socio-economically similar countries, he confirms that the reforms had the expected positive effects. In turn, Roberts et al. (2013) provide slightly more pessimistic conclusions. Analyzing 103 countries, they find that countries that have undergone a major electoral change towards less restrictive electoral systems have seen an increase in the proportion of women in legislature, but that these effects were not statistically significant. Similarly, comparing women's share of legislatures across the first and second chambers in 19 democracies with bicameral systems, the authors find that only about 70% of elections show the predicted patterns, where chambers with proportional systems tend to elect more women.

Others analyze mixed electoral systems that allow them to compare proportional and majoritarian parts of the electoral systems within the same country. Vengroff et al (2000) takes a close look at seven countries with mixed systems and finds that women tend to be more likely elected in the proportional parts of the mixed systems in six out of seven countries. Taking an intersectional approach, Barker and Coffee (2018) report that the proportional part of a mixed system in New Zealand tends to elect more ethnic majority as well as ethnic minority women. In turn, Moser (2001) compares proportional and majoritarian parts of mixed systems in seven elections of four post-communist democracies and finds that women are more likely to be elected in the proportional parts only in less than 60% of elections, and the relationships are not always statistically significant nor consistent across electoral years within the same country. Similarly, Moser and Scheiner (2012, ch.8) study 18 mixed systems in established and new democracies and show that women are more successful in PR tiers. When they control for confounders, however, this relationship is much weaker among post-communist democracies.

Overall, the lessons drawn from studies that exploit within-country comparisons mirror the findings from cross-national studies and confirm the patterns we have uncovered in the previous section: proportional electoral systems tend to elect more women of all backgrounds, although the magnitude of effects, and sometimes even the direction, varies across cases.

3.2. Do Proportional Electoral Systems Foster Women's Political Engagement and Participation?

More recently, scholars consider the impact of proportional electoral systems on women's political engagement and participation. Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer (2010, 2012 ch.3,4) look at 34 democracies and find that women's and men's political engagement and participation tend to be more similar if electoral systems produce more proportional outcomes, especially with respect to political interest, knowledge, persuasion, campaign work, political contact and following politics in news. However, they also report that large district magnitude – that is more common in proportional systems – tends to narrow gender gaps in discussing politics but widen gender gaps in the probability to contact politicians. Consistent with these findings, Cordova and Rangel (2017) analyze 44 mostly Western countries and find that systems with more proportional outcomes tend to reduce gender gaps in campaign participation. However, they also find no effects on campaign attentiveness and party attachment and report adverse effects on gender gaps in party information.

Interestingly, most follow-up studies find almost exclusively no or adverse effects of proportional systems. Beauregard (2014) studies 20 OECD countries and finds that neither district magnitude nor proportional outcomes have an independent effect on campaign activities and political persuasion of women vs men. In turn, greater number of parties and coalition governments – typically associated with proportional electoral systems – tend to have adverse effects on women's engagement. Similarly, Nir and McClurg (2015) study 33 advanced industrialized countries and find adverse effects of proportional electoral systems on the gender gap in political discussion. Most recently, Tambe and Jormfeldt (2025) study 32 African countries and find adverse effects of proportional systems on the gender gap in protest action, and no effects on raising political issues, attending political meeting, political contact and party membership.

The recent revival of a suffrage literature also re-examines the question of whether proportional electoral systems facilitate women's electoral mobilization. Examining historical electoral reform in Norway in the early 20th century, Skorge (2023) estimates that the reform increased the fraction of women among voters by staggering 38%. Similar findings are reported by Teele (2023), who confirms that women's turnout increased more than men's after the Norwegian electoral reform also at the national level. However, a quick look at available sex-separated data from the turn of the 20th century across ten Western countries does not suggest that countries with proportional electoral systems systematically mobilized more women (Morgan-Collins 2024a). For example, the two countries that reported the narrowest gender turnout gaps upon women's suffrage, New Zealand and Austria, used majoritarian and proportional electoral formulas, respectively.

The mixed findings are reflected also in cross-sectional studies. Looking at 32 African countries, Tambe and Jormfeldt (2025) find that countries with proportional systems tend to narrow the gender turnout gap, although they estimate very small average effects – reducing the gap by a mere 1 percentage point. Similarly, Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer (2012, ch.4) find that women do not report that they are more likely to vote vis-a-vis men neither when district magnitude is large nor when electoral outcomes are highly proportional. In turn, Cordova and Rangel (2017) report adverse effects, as countries with electoral systems that produce the most proportional results decrease the probability that women vote, whilst not affecting men's probability to vote.

Overall, the scholarly literature on the effects of proportional systems on women's political engagement and participation is mixed regardless of the research design used. Whilst some scholars find that proportional electoral systems tend to facilitate women's political inclusion as citizens and voters, this is not always the case, and reports of adverse effects are not uncommon.

4. How Can We Explain the Mixed Findings in the Literature?

This chapter identifies two broad types of explanations for why scholars sometimes report contradicting findings: contextual and methodological. First, the chapter suggests that whether proportional electoral systems facilitate women's political inclusion can reflect the context in which the electoral system is applied. Development, cultural attitudes, party systems, political competition and men's participation can all moderate whether proportional electoral systems can further, limit or have no effect on women's political inclusion. Second, the chapter examines whether at least some of the mixed findings in the literature may also reflect methodological challenges faced by scholars. How scholars address the multifaceted nature of electoral systems, how they identify the effects of electoral systems and how they measure key concepts may all determine whether scholars find positive, null or even adverse effects of proportional electoral systems on women's political inclusion as politicians and citizens.

(i) How Contexts Can Moderate the Effects of Electoral Systems

Perhaps the most discussed explanation for the mixed findings in the literature is that the effects of electoral systems are context dependent. Perhaps contextual factors moderate how well, and if at all, proportional electoral systems foster women's political inclusion, or even which sub-groups of women benefit. Even if proportional systems are more favorable to women of all backgrounds overall, the favorability may not extend to extreme contexts, namely *when political participation is too costly*. In this section, we review the literature that highlights how, and if at all, context may shape the impact of electoral systems on women's political inclusion as politicians and citizens.

Women Politicians. A large body of scholarship discusses the extent to which *socio-economic*, *cultural* and *political* context may determine how well proportional electoral systems facilitate women's chances of getting elected. Proportional systems may facilitate women's electability if women do not face severe structural, cultural and political barriers that make women's political inclusion too costly, such as by reducing the pool of available women candidates and discouraging parties from nominating women (Beckwith 1992; Evans and Harrison 2012; Krook and Moser 2013; Matland 1998; Roberts et al 2013).

Socio-economically, scholars consistently find that proportional electoral systems tend to be less likely to foster women's electability in less developed countries (Hughes 2009; Matland 2008; Moser 2001; Moser and Scheiner 2012; Robert et al 2013; Rosen 2013; Tremblay 2007; Viterna et al. 2008). At the same time, low development levels do not appear to always preclude the benefits of proportional systems, as scholars observe positive effects of less restrictive systems on women's electability in Senegal (Vengroff et al 2000), Lesotho, Pakistan and the Philippines (Högström 2025).

Culturally, restrictive norms may limit parties' incentives to nominate women candidates in proportional systems (Matland 1998; Moser and Scheiner 2012, ch.8; Schwindt-Bayer et al

2005; Tremblay 2008), whilst women in ethnic religious parties can be *disadvantaged* in proportional systems (Holmsten et al 2010). At the same time, patriarchal attitudes towards women as a group do not appear to mitigate the positive effects of proportional systems in Ukraine (Thames 2018). In fact, the most traditional regions in Italy are estimated to be the most likely to elect women (Profeta and Woodhouse 2022), whilst right parties in the least diverse districts can favor ethnic minority women over ethnic minority men candidates (Mugge 2016; Jassen 2022; Trappen et al 2024).

Politically, the type of a party system can restrict the ability of parties to nominate women candidates. Parties need to be strong enough to have control over nomination of several electable positions (Matland 1993; Matland and Taylor 1997; Schmidt and Saunders 2004) to include women on their lists. When party systems are so fragmented that each party controls only a handful of nomination, competition for few nominations within parties can restrict parties' taste for diversity and inclusion in a similar way as single member districts (Moser 2001; Moser and Scheiner 2012, ch.8).

Overall, a systematic look at the literature suggests that unfavorable socio-economic, political and cultural contexts can limit the ability of proportional electoral systems to foster women's chances of getting elected. At the same time, unfavorable contexts do not appear to mitigate the positive effects of proportional systems in all countries, districts, or parties.

Women Citizens. Contextual factors are also known to shape the extent to which proportional electoral systems foster women's electoral participation. Namely, a *baseline pre-reform level of mobilization among men* appears to moderate whether proportional electoral reform narrows or widens the gender turnout gap (Morgan-Collins 2024a). Proportional electoral systems may only foster women's electoral mobilization if most of the "easier to mobilize" men are already mobilized. In an extreme context when most men rarely vote, introducing proportional reform may spur to action more men than women and therefore widen the gap. If parties have incentives to target the "cheapest" voters regardless of gender and the "cheapest" not-yet-mobilized voters are mostly men, then parties can target more men than women after the reform. Indeed, the proportional reform in Norway *widened* the gender turnout gap in municipalities with the lowest men's turnout (Morgan-Collins 2024b).

One important implication of these findings is that different groups of women are likely to be mobilized by proportional systems in different contexts. When proportional systems successfully help to narrow the gender turnout gap, mobilization is likely to increase among the most marginalized women, perhaps women from lower-class background or disengaged ethnic minorities. In an extreme context where even men rarely vote and proportional systems are likely to widen the gender turnout gap, however, proportional electoral systems are likely to mobilize only the most privileged women.

Others highlight that the effects of proportional systems on women's electoral mobilization can be moderated by *pre-reform levels of electoral competition*. Indeed, the gender turnout gap narrowed after the electoral reform in Norway especially in the least competitive pre-reform districts (Morgan-Collins 2024a; Teele 2023 but also see similar argument in Skorge 2023). These observations may help to explain why majoritarian systems can sometimes produce narrow gender turnout gaps. For example, the exceptionally fierce electoral competition in New Zealand may explain why New Zealand historically manifested the smallest gender turnout gap despite women voting as early as in 1893 (Morgan-Collins 2024a). However, further examination of the Norwegian electoral reform suggests that the effect of pre-reform electoral

competition is nonetheless moderated by levels of men's turnout (Morgan-Collins 2024a). Namely, if men's turnout is very low before the reform, increasing competition with electoral reform can propel parties to mobilize more men than women – and therefore *widen* the gender turnout gap.

Overall, the literature suggests that political context – especially the costs of electoral participation – can mitigate or even reverse the ability of proportional electoral systems to mobilize the least politically active women. Whilst context appears to explain divergent conclusions about the effects of electoral systems on women's electoral participation, it remains to be seen whether it may also moderate the effects on women's non-electoral participation and engagement.

(ii) How Methodological Choices Can Determine What Scholars Find

Beside contextual factors, the mixed findings in the literature may also reflect how scholars study the effects of electoral systems. The cumulative evidence from cross-sectional, case study and mixed designs largely points towards the same conclusion: proportional electoral systems are typically associated with greater political inclusion of women, although this is not always the case. The research design itself therefore cannot fully account for the mixed findings in the literature. However, scholars typically make a series of methodological decisions regardless of the research design they use, and these may help us to explain at least some of the mixed findings in the literature. This section explains how scholars address the multifaceted nature of electoral systems, how they identify the effects of electoral systems and how they measure key concepts.

Women Politicians. One difficulty in estimating the effects of proportional systems stems from the fact that each electoral system is one of its own kind; its overall effects are determined by a unique set of multiple components that are far broader than the electoral formula alone (Krook 2018; Krook and Schwindt-Bayer 2013). The cumulative effect of all components of the electoral system – rather than whether a proportional or a majoritarian electoral formula is used – can help to explain why scholars typically find that the effects of electoral systems vary in magnitude, and sometimes even direction, across cases.

Specifically, scholars have documented that proportional electoral systems are substantially more inclusive of women candidates when combined with larger districts, (Engstrom 1987; Rule 1987; Schwindt-Bayer 2005), party-centered formulas, and ballot structures (Dhima et al 2021; Engstrom 1987; Gonzalez-Eiras and Sanz 2021; Luhiste 2015; Schwindt-Bayer et al 2010; Thames and Williams 2010; Valdinì 2012). On the other hand, some majoritarian systems can be substantially more inclusive when their district magnitude is greater than one, especially when the formula is less candidate-centred (Matland and Brown 1992; Valdinì 2012). Analysis of U.S. elections, however, shows that the benefits of increasing district magnitude in majoritarian systems can be limited to White women, whilst having no effect on African American women and Latinas (Troustine and Valdinì 2008).

The effect of ballot structures and the extent to which the electoral formula is party-centered can also be moderated by contextual factors. In fact, the candidate-centered open ballots and STV may benefit women candidates when voters are open to women more than parties (Golder et al 2017; Matland and Lilliefeldt 2014; Schwindt-Bayer et al 2010; Valdinì 2012). In turn, the success and nomination of ethnic minority women appear to be driven by cultural attitudes

and context regardless of the electoral formula and ballot structure (Celis et al 2014; Janssen 2022; Mugge 2016; Smet and Collingnon 2025).

Overall, this suggests that proportional electoral systems are more inclusive of women candidates if they are set up such that parties have full control over the election of many candidates – a finding that is consistent with scholars' insights into how and why proportional electoral systems foster women's political inclusion. Even though these insights may be moderated by culture and may not fully account for the election of ethnic minority women, difficulty to account for the multifaceted nature of electoral systems can help to explain why scholars may sometimes conclude that proportional electoral systems do not always perform as expected.

Women Citizens. The study of electoral systems on women's citizens is still in its relative infancy but also produces strikingly mixed results. At least some of these mixed findings appear rooted in the methodological choices scholars make regarding identification and measurements.

The most significant challenge scholars face results from the fact that electoral systems do not only influence women citizens, but also – as we have seen – women politicians. This raises a methodological issue because women politicians can also shape political participation of women citizens (e.g. Wolbrecht and Campbell 2007; 2025). The worry here is that proportional electoral systems may not exert direct effects on women's political engagement. Rather, proportional systems may increase women's chances of getting elected and the elected women politicians can then facilitate other women's political participation (Beauregard 2014; Cordova and Rangel 2017; Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2012, ch.2; Nir and McClurg 2015; Skorge 2023; Tambe and Jormfeldt 2025).

To account for this concern, scholars often control for the proportion of women in legislatures. However, this approach effectively means controlling for another consequence of treatment, which can produce post-treatment bias, therefore clouding the ability to estimate the impact of electoral systems (King 2010). One way forward involves placing greater emphasis on the models that *do not* control for the proportion of women in the legislature and interpreting these findings as capturing the total effect of proportional system (Dworschak 2024). Indeed, the models that do not control for the presence of women in legislatures often produce stronger and more consistently (overall) positive effects of proportional systems on women's political engagement and participation (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2010, 2012, ch.3; Tambe and Jormfeldt 2025).

In addition to identification, how scholars measure key concepts can also explain some of the mixed findings in the literature. First, little consensus exists among scholars on how to measure proportional electoral systems. Whilst some scholars consider the effects of institutional features such as the electoral formulas or district magnitude, others focus on the proportionality of results these systems produce. The implicit assumption is that if proportional systems do not produce proportional outcomes, they may not increase women's political engagement and participation as theorized. Indeed, scholars that use both measures tend to find more consistently positive results of proportional systems when they measure outcomes rather than institutions (Beauregard 2014; Cordova and Rangel 2017; Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2012).

Second, scholars often conceptualize and measure women's political engagement and participation differently and tend to report different results depending on the type of women's

engagement and participation they use. Most commonly, scholars find adverse effects when a higher number of parties – which is more typical in proportional systems – imposes a greater informational and resource barrier on women, such as women's probability to contact a politician (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2012, ch.4), obtain accurate party information (Cordova and Rangel 2017), engage in campaign activities and persuasion (Beauregard 2013), and possibly also in protest action (Tambe and Jormfeldt 2025).

Third, scholars often measure women's electoral participation differently. Whilst some use proportion measures, such as the share of women among voters, others use difference-in-proportion measures, such as the percentage point difference between women's and men's turnout (known as the gender turnout gap). In an extreme context, such as in a low-salient settings where the incentives to vote and to mobilize are very low in general, which typically means that even the most resourceful men usually do not vote, the gender turnout gap can widen after implementation of proportional electoral systems, even if the fraction of women voters increases (Morgan-Collins 2024b). The use of different measures can explain why some studies find consistently positive effects of proportional systems on women's turnout vis-à-vis men's (Teele 2023; Skorge 2023), whilst others report more nuanced findings (Morgan-Collins 2024a,b).

Overall, a systematic look at the literature reveals the many difficulties scholars face when estimating the effects of electoral systems on women citizens and voters. How scholars identify the effects and measure key concepts may influence the answers they get, plausibly explaining at least some of the mixed findings in the literature.

6. Where Next in the Study of Electoral Systems?

Over the past 40 years, scholars have uncovered how and when electoral systems shape the chances of women getting elected. Scholars identified and largely addressed multiple methodological issues, studied varied contexts and recently have started to pay greater attention to whether electoral systems produce different effects on women of different identities. By and large, a consensus has been reached that proportional electoral systems can substantially facilitate women's political inclusion in legislatures, but that policymakers need to be very careful in designing systems that are most likely to work in a specific context.

On the other hand, many questions remain open about the effect of electoral systems on women's political engagement and participation. Here, scholarly consensus has not yet been reached as to whether proportional electoral systems facilitate the incorporation of women into politics as citizens and voters, and if so, in which contexts. Many methodological challenges remain unaddressed and may continue to hinder scholars' ability to reach this consensus. Importantly, we do not yet know whether different women may be affected differently.

Whilst virtually all gender scholars emphasize the importance of taking intersectional perspectives (Celis and Childs 2024; Hughes 2013; Krook 2018; Krook and Schwindt-Bayer 2013), this agenda remains to be understudied despite its central place in the study of democratic politics in general (Celis and Childs 2024). Namely, whilst scholars have only just begun to address the effect of electoral systems on ethnic minority women, we know very little about women of different social classes or sexualities. As no electoral system can ever facilitate inclusion of all women, the question of "who" is included in politics under more inclusive electoral systems remains open.

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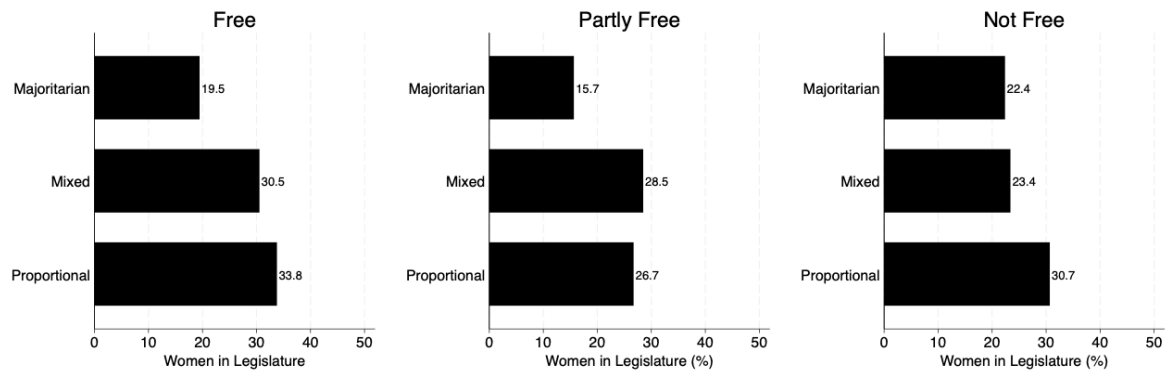
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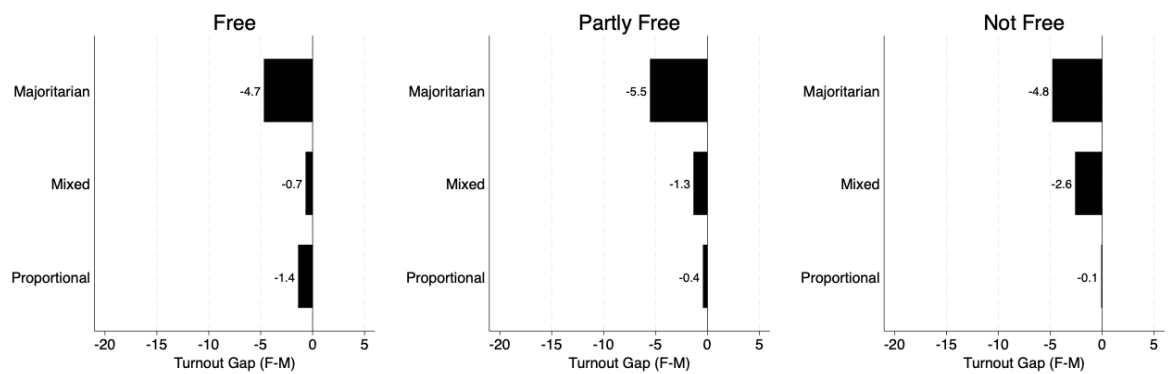
APPENDIX

Appendix Figure 1: Gender Gaps and Electoral Systems by Political Freedom Status

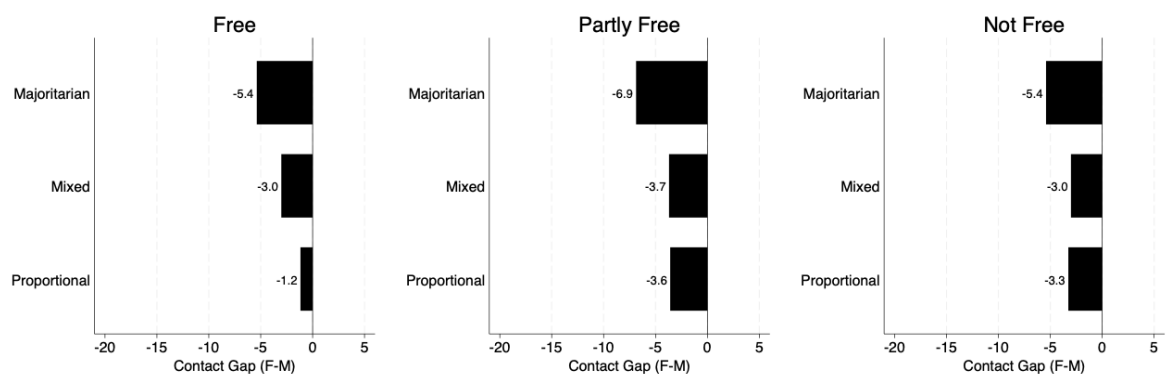
a) Women in Legislature



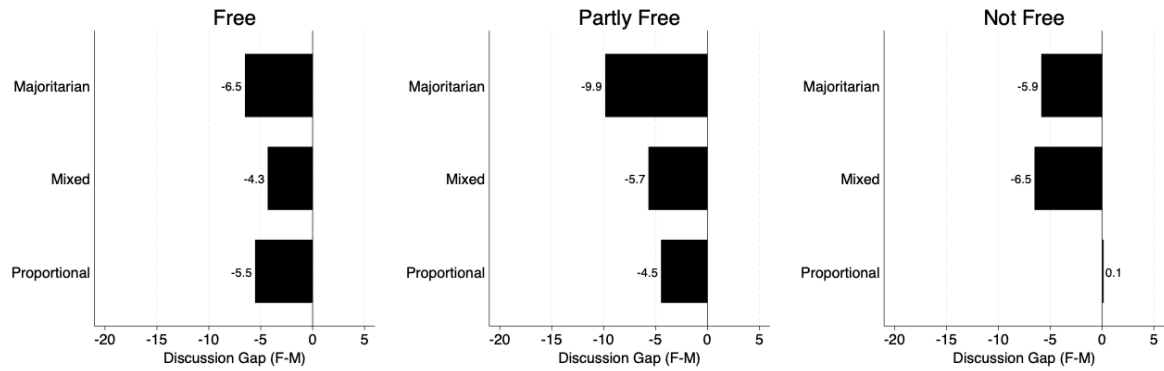
b) Electoral Participation – Turnout



c) Non-Electoral Political Participation – Contact



d) Political Engagement – Discussion



Notes: Data sourced from IPU Parline Dataset (October 2024); World Value Survey, Wave 7 (2017-2022); IDEA Electoral System Design Database (November 2024); Freedom in a World rating by Freedom House 2024.