

Effect Of Closed List Proportional Representation On The Election Of Women And Youth

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Questions

What is the effect of adopting a closed list proportional representation (PR) system on the numbers of women and youth elected to national parliaments?

Where possible, reference evidence from countries in the Arab region, particularly Jordan and Morocco.

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1. Summary

There is evidence that a closed list proportional representation (PR) system increases the election of female and youth candidates, particularly when accompanied by a type of quota known as a placement mandate.

Definitions of Open and Closed List

Open list PR: Voters choose *individual candidates* on a ballot. Sometimes they may be able to choose a candidate and/or a party.

Closed list PR: Voters choose from a list of *parties* on a ballot. Parties decide a list of candidates before election day, with candidates at the top of the list first in the queue to gain legislative seats compared to candidates at the bottom, depending on the number of votes a party gains.

Types of Gender and Youth Quotas

Voluntary or mandatory party quotas: Parties may voluntarily commit to nominating a proportion of female or youth candidates in open or closed lists, or they may be required to by legislation.

Placement mandates: Because, in a closed list system, candidates gain seats depending on how high their party places them on a list, parties may voluntarily or be required to place women or youth high on a list. A gendered “zipper” system is where every second entry on the list is a woman.

Reserved seats: A proportion of seats are set aside for women or youth in a legislature.

The exact effects of a closed list system on the election of women and youth depends on a number of other factors, including:

- **What is being compared:** Open list PR is generally considered to be better than first past the post for women and youth inclusion. Closed list PR is often seen as better than open list PR. Some authors say that closed list PR when accompanied by a “zipper mechanism” is better than a gender or youth quota that reserves legislative seats.
- **The type of sanction if a mandated quota is violated:** It is more effective for electoral commissions to reject electoral lists if they do not comply with regulations rather than issue fines.
- **The degree to which bias against women and youth exists in society:** In a relatively unbiased society, voters are not put off by the appearance of female candidates on an open list ballot. However, a closed list is best for female representation in traditional societies where the electorate is less likely to vote for a woman candidate.
- **The size of the voting district and the number of parties competing (district and party “magnitudes”):** This relates to the probability of electing women or youth where there are more chances of candidates gaining seats.
- **If there are tandem quotas for women and youth:** Parties may try to “kill two birds with one stone” by nominating a high proportion of young women candidates who can fulfil both quotas at the same time. Some research has shown a knock-on effect of reducing

the numbers of young men and middle-aged women members of parliament while leaving the shares of middle-aged men MPs unchanged.

The degree to which inclusive electoral reforms lead to genuine change is dependent on context and is highly dynamic. The research undertaken for this rapid review found some approaches to this question, including looking at the inclusion of women in senior parliament and party roles after they gain seats through quotas, and the backgrounds of the women who gain seats through quotas. Research from Morocco, Jordan and Tunisia shows that there is nothing automatic about gaining positions of authority or influence for women once elected.

State of the evidence: This topic has been heavily researched since the 1990s, and the evidence found during the course of this rapid review is a small proportion of what exists. This review relies mostly on academic research, with some additional input from international think-tanks on electoral regulation. There is comparatively much less research on youth inclusion than on the inclusion of women.

2. Candidate selection in different electoral systems

The underrepresentation of women and youth in politics may be understood from a variety of different approaches including socioeconomic, cultural, and institutional. One set of institutional factors relate to the rules that govern different types of electoral system.

Proportional representation versus first past the post

Many authors say that **proportional representation (PR) systems tend to support the election of women and youth better than first past the post systems (FPTP)**. If the public is generally less inclined to vote for women or youth, there is a disincentive for political parties to field women and youth candidates under FPTP because they are only able to present one candidate at elections. The Ace Electoral Knowledge Network calls this the “**most broadly acceptable candidate syndrome**” (ACE, n.d.a).

Norris (2006) compared the election of women in 180 countries, concluding that “as a simple rule, women proved almost twice as likely to be elected under proportional than under majoritarian electoral systems” (p.41). Paxton and Hughes (2014, Chapter 6) cite several studies of countries which elect part of their legislature using FPTP and part using PR. Even in the same country, they find that women are elected at much higher rates under the PR system than FPTP.

Closed list versus open list PR systems

In contrast to FPTP, in PR systems, parties present multiple candidates for election on the same ballot, giving a wider range of candidates a bigger chance of being elected as they do not have to appeal to everyone within an electoral district to win a seat (Electoral Reform Society, n.d.).

“Closed list” and “open list” refers to the way that political parties choose the candidates they put up for election under PR. In a closed list, each party publishes a list of candidates for each area. On polling day, the ballot paper just has a list of parties and voters mark the party they support. In an open list, each party on the ballot paper has a list of candidates, and the voter chooses a candidate (Electoral Reform Society, n.d.).

In effect, **closed list** PR systems are **party-centred** because the focus of the electoral contest is the differences between parties and not candidates' personal traits. In contrast, **open list** PR systems are **candidate-centred** because voters have to choose between candidates (Allik, 2015).

In relation to the effects of the closed list versus the open list systems on the election of women, Allik (2015) explains it as a discussion about who the "assumed culprit" is - whether it is the biased voters who do not want to vote for women, or the parties with male-dominated hierarchies who do not want to place women as electoral candidates. "**Closed lists should be superior to open lists only if parties support women's candidacy and voters do not**" (p.431).

3. International research on the effects of closed list PR

Aggregate cross-national evidence tends to show that closed lists support the election of women

In a literature review, Schmidt (2019, p.149) notes that **scholars have generally viewed closed lists as more "female-friendly"** than open lists. Allik (2015, p.430) cites further cross-national studies which conclude that "countries using closed lists elect more females than those with open lists."

Citing Thames and Williams (2010), Allik (2015, p.430) says that systems where candidates are highly visible can reduce women's representation compared to the party-centred systems because parties may be reluctant to nominate women as such nominations can reduce the party's electoral success.

Some other studies have found no difference in women's representation between countries with closed and open lists (Schmidt 2009; Schwindt-Bayer 2009).

Schmidt (2019, p.147) describes a "longstanding debate in the literature on electoral systems regarding the relative merits of open and closed lists for the election of women."

It seems that a number of **other variables, different contexts, and what is being compared** inform research results more than the simple comparison of closed list to open list systems.

Different variables and mechanisms impact the effects of closed and open lists on the election of women

Country context: Several authors note that the effectiveness of closed lists depends on whether it is the electorate or the party elites who are least progressive in their attitude to women political leaders. Valdini (2013) notes that in more egalitarian societies, it makes little difference whether the list is open or closed because voters are not put off by the appearance of female candidates on an open list ballot. However, a closed list is best for female representation in traditional societies where the electorate is less likely to vote for a woman candidate.

Ruedin (2018) puts it like this: "If we imagine a society with conservative party elites and a progressive electorate (or where the party elite assumes the population to be more conservative as they are), closed PR lists would be detrimental."

This same calculation is also relevant within countries, where the electorate may be less ready to vote for a woman in the provinces compared to large, usually more progressive, cities. Schmidt (2019) provides evidence of this within one country (Peru) where comparisons of list type are possible due to electoral system changes. His research “demonstrates that **the type of list is not of great importance in the capital, but that female candidates fare better under closed lists in the provinces**, where the socioeconomic context and political culture are less supportive of women” (p.147).

District and party magnitudes: District magnitude refers to the number of representatives an electoral district sends to the national legislature. Paxton and Hughes (2014, Chapter 6) say this is the “key reason” why women do better under PR systems because it means that women can get on a party's ballot without displacing a male. This is compared to FPTP where there is only one person elected per district.

Party magnitude refers to the number of parties competing in an electoral district. Citing Matland (1993), Ruedin (2018) explains this clearly. In effect, the probability of electing a woman becomes less when more parties compete in one electoral district.

Placement mandates: However, even in districts which send multiple representatives to national legislatures, if a party wins a lot of votes, the candidates which win a seat are determined by how high up on the list they are placed. Paxton and Hughes (2014, Chapter 6) say:

“So where are women on the party's list? Are they in a safe position, guaranteed to win a seat in the legislature based on the party's expected share of the vote? Or are they in a risky list position or even a hopeless list position? Parties can certainly present the appearance of balance between the genders but have men at the top of the list and women at the bottom.”

This means that **closed list works best for women where there is a placement mandate**. Africa Barometer (2021, p.55) recommends the use of a “zipper” system on the list, where men and women are distributed evenly. Parties can either do this voluntarily, or it may be mandated by legislation.

Comparing a number of these different institutional variables (closed lists, high district or party magnitudes, gender quotas, and placement mandates) in a cross-country regression analysis, Schmidt (2009, p.190) concludes that “The results provide strong evidence that contextual differences – rather than institutional factors – explain most of the variation. Among the institutional variables, **only placement mandates clearly matter.**”

Research on the effects of closed lists on youth representation is smaller, but there is evidence that placement mandates work

de Paredes & Desrues (2021, p.42) say that:

“compared with gender and minority quotas which have been widely adopted and studied, **the spread of youth quotas has been largely overlooked**. Most of what we know comes from multiple reports from international organisations which perceive this representative tool as progress from a democratic perspective and strongly encourage their adoption.”

Blackman et al. (2018) **examined the effects of placement quotas** in candidate lists for municipal elections in **Tunisia**. Introduced in 2017, Tunisia mandated that all candidate lists must include at least one person between the age of 18 and 35 among the top three members of the list. Additionally, each set of six consecutive list members must include an additional youth. The authors found that despite these requirements, younger candidates were concentrated toward the end of many electoral lists, meaning they were less likely to win a seat on municipal councils. Nevertheless, in the 2018 municipal elections, **more than 37 percent of the winning candidates were under the age of 36**.

‘Tandem’ youth and female candidate list quotas can interact in unexpected ways

Belschner (2018) notes that all states that have adopted youth quotas also have gender quotas. Adopting two quotas at the same time are known as “tandem quotas.”

Belschner (2020) reports on the introduction of youth quotas into candidate lists for national elections in Tunisia where there must be one (male or female) candidate under 35 years among the first four candidates on each electoral list. The youth quota is less absolute than the quotas for female candidates because if the candidate lists do not meet the youth requirement, they are still allowed to compete for election, but are deprived of 50% of their state reimbursement.

Belschner (2020) compared the 2011 elections with the 2014 elections, and found that the **adoption of tandem candidate quotas in closed lists for both women and youth led to even higher rates of middle-aged male MPs** than in the 2011 elections and high shares of young female MPs in the Tunisian parliament. She explains it thus:

“The parity regulation demanded [parties] to fill every second spot on their lists with female candidates, whereas the youth quota requested that one person under 35 years must be placed within the first four positions. The quotas are thus “nested”, that is they apply to the same electoral lists. As predicted by theories on tandem quotas’ intersectional impact, the Tunisian parties mostly chose to kill two birds with one stone. They placed a young, female candidate on the second or fourth list position and a middle-aged male on the first and third position” (p.268).

Also recognising issues of “intersectionality” when designing youth quotas, the Ace Project (ACE, n.d.b) advises that “there is a need to understand that **young people are not a homogenous block** and that other social aspects (such as gender, rural/urban dwelling, ethnicity, and language) need to be taken into consideration when designing interventions.”

4. Pros and cons of open list versus closed list for inclusion.

Pros - strong on inclusion, if mandated and enforced

As noted above, the pros of closed list are that, where parties are mandated to do placements, women and youth have a better chance of being elected, particularly in contexts where the electorate is biased.

However, it is important to note that **an electoral provision may have weak or strong implementation**. A list or placement quota may be voluntary or mandatory. Even where mandatory, research shows that some political parties circumvent or ignore gender or youth quotas. Dahlerup and Freidenvall (2005) say that the most effective sanctions require that the electoral commission reject electoral lists that fail to comply with regulations. Citing research on quotas in France, Paxton and Hughes (2014, Chapter 6) say that monetary sanctions are often less successful at motivating compliance.

Female legislators may be more responsive to their female constituents when elected through a quota system. Based on a survey of 200 **Moroccan** and **Algerian** parliamentarians, Benstead (2016) found that deputies elected through quotas are more responsive to women than members of either sex elected without quotas as a result of a perceived mandate to serve women.

Cons - weak accountability, potential for nepotism and scepticism

Where voters choose parties rather than individual candidates under a closed list system, this could undermine the legitimacy and accountability of an elected representative. In other words, the elected candidate could be more interested in their relationship with the party bosses who chose them as a highly placed candidate on the list, rather than the people who elected her Africa Barometer (2021).

However, this seems to depend on context. As noted above (Benstead, 2016), female legislators have been found in some contexts to in fact be more responsive to their female electorate at least.

On the use of quotas in general, the Ace Project (ACE, n.d.c) reports that “some women have argued that quotas end up being a way to **appease, and ultimately sideline, women or to privilege the female relatives and friends of traditional male politicians** rather than encouraging females to develop careers in politics, which can take many years.” They say that this could be partially mitigated by focusing on quotas at the local level: “Since entry into politics is often done at the local level, even by male politicians, it may make more sense to institute quotas, at least initially, at the local rather than the national level.”

Paxton and Hughes (2014, Chapter 6) note that women's groups sometimes “argue that **quotas may become a ceiling rather than a floor**. Because women's presence is guaranteed at a certain level, parties or governments may not pursue strategies to include women in greater numbers.”

A USAID report (n.d.) on the impact of electoral changes on women in Jordan notes that “the absence of rhetoric on the importance of women's participation in legislative committees resulted in a general sentiment that the **quota system is part of an external agenda imposed by international organizations**. This has led to a political backlash, claiming that the quota is unconstitutional since it goes against the concept of equality among citizens” (p.2).

5. The effect of closed list PR in the Arab region, particularly Morocco and Jordan.

Societal context

As explained above, researchers say that the use of closed list PR alongside placement quotas has a relatively **higher impact on the election of women where societies are particularly biased against women political leaders**. Given this general principle, research highlights some social aspects that implies that closed lists + placement mandates are effective and necessary in Jordan and the MENA region. For example:

- **Jordanians do not widely associate women with effective political leadership**. In a World Values Survey (2017), 81% of Jordanians agree or strongly agree that men make better political leaders than women do (in Kao & Benstead, 2019, p.14).
- **Women are less likely to find routes into politics through political parties in the MENA region**. Benstead (2020) notes that “Women are less present in party leadership in the MENA region, but they are also **less likely to belong to political parties** or be active in national and local political affairs. Benstead and Lust (2015) found that 5% of Egyptian men belong to political parties, compared to 2% of women. In Tunisia, the figures are 4% for men, 2% for women. In Libya, 7% of men and 3% of women state that they are members of political parties. In Tunisia, according to the LGPI (2015), 8% of men and 3.4% of women are members of political parties” (p.257).
- Benstead (2020, p.267) also highlights that **Islamist parties have been among the most active in running female candidates and utilising women to mobilise voters** – albeit while respecting piety and traditional values. Citing Abdel-Samad and Benstead (2016), she notes that Islamist parties may be more likely to use women to mobilise female supporters in segregated environments such as homes, mosques, and social events. Drawing on her 2016 survey (Benstead, 2016), she also finds evidence for an “Islamic mandate effect” in Morocco, where the Moroccan Party of Justice and Development obtained 13% of seats in the 2002– 2007 elections and served more female constituents than other parties.

The historical interaction of gender and minority quotas in Jordan

Over the years, Jordan has experimented with different types of PR and quotas. Under an open list PR system, one former MP, Rula al-Hroob, “explained that as Jordanians increasingly understand the interplay of the open lists and the gender quota, men are realizing that it disadvantages them to have a ‘strong woman’ on their electoral list” (Hayat-Rased, 2019, p.9).

A 2019 report by a civil society organisation in Jordan highlights some of the effects of using “reserved seats” quotas in an open list PR system. The authors state that:

Although Jordan has instituted minority quotas for Christians, Circassians, and Chechens, women from ethnically and societally marginalized groups are virtually unrepresented in Jordanian Parliament...Despite technically having more pathways to election than minority men, minority women have low chances of getting elected. These

women are the least likely to be elected through the minority quotas because of their gender identity, and the least likely to be elected through the gender quota because of their ethnic identity, in addition to being excluded from running in most districts or winning through competition (Hayat-Rased, 2019, p.10).

According to Kao and Benstead (2019), it is telling that tribalists do not have a preference for male tribal members over female members of their tribe. This is in line with Bush and Gao (2017), who suggest that 40 tribes benefit from running women candidates for quota seats because women can be effective sources of *wasta* [nepotism] and thus it is strategic to do so even if tribes are patriarchal and not particularly supportive of women's leadership. **Tribalists will support female tribal candidates significantly more than non-tribalists.**

Ryan (2021) details some of the different iterations of electoral reform undertaken over the years in Jordan, and describes the most recent 2021 move away from this open list system.

Do closed lists with quotas lead to genuine political participation?

The research undertaken for this rapid review did not find any cross-national findings on this topic. What follows is a small selection of some of the ways that scholars have approached this question on Morocco, Jordan, and Tunisia.

The Ace project recognises that **the degree to which inclusive electoral reforms leads to genuine change is heavily dependent on context:**

Being elected to a legislature does not necessarily mean being given substantive decision-making power, and in some countries women legislators, particularly those elected from reserved or special seats, are marginalized from real decision-making responsibility. Yet in other countries, women have used the position afforded to them by quotas to make significant contributions to policy making and influence 'traditional' policy making (ACE, n.d.c).

Leadership positions within parliaments

One measure of power in parliaments is the ability to set the legislative agenda, which in turn depends on gaining senior leadership positions in parliament.

- In the case of **Jordan**, Hayat-Rased (2019) notes that "once elected, female parliamentarians face limitations in setting the legislative agenda. In an interview with Hayat-Rased, Saddam Abu Azzam, the former Director of the Jordanian Parliament's Research Center, provided the anecdotal example of the derogatory preparation for a typical public hearing, in which "they say, come on and bring us a woman so it looks like we have 'women's rights.'" This **marginalization of female parliamentarians is reflected in the current Parliament's leadership**, where the Speaker and First and Second Deputies are all men, and no women were nominated as candidates for the positions of Speaker or First Deputy" (p.11).
- In the case of **Tunisia**, Belschner (2019) looks at the effect of tandem youth and gender quotas. She finds that "**middle-aged men occupy most leading positions in inner-parliamentarian committees**, followed by middle-aged female, young male, and young female MPs (in this order). This hierarchy can also be observed in another body

reflecting inner-parliamentarian positions of power. The 'assembly's office' (bureau de l'Assemblée) that is in charge for governing the administrative procedures for the functioning of the parliament is composed as follows: Eleven middle-aged men (including the president and the first vice-president), one middle-aged women who is the second vice-president, one young man, and no young women" (p.273). Tunisia introduced a closed list system in 2011 with electoral lists mandated to contain 50% male and female candidates placed alternately on the list positions. The youth quotas were initially voluntary, and then made mandatory in 2017 when parties had to place at least one young candidate among the first four positions on the electoral lists.

Leadership positions within political parties

Another way to gauge genuine political inclusion is to look at the number of women who have gained senior leadership roles within political parties.

- Overall, across the **MENA** region, Benstead (2020) notes that "women's limited role in party leadership – and their lower engagement in political parties – contrasts with their rise in legislatures at the national and sub- national levels" due to electoral quotas (p.258). In her case studies of **Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria** as case studies, she states that "significant gender gaps in the internal decision- making structures of parties and the executive branch remain" (p.256).
- In her research on youth and gender quotas in **Tunisia**, Belschner (2019) also looks at leadership positions in political parties. In two of the major political parties, she finds a pattern whereby 22-50% of the parties' leading board members are women, but they are all middle-aged. There are neither young male nor young female members. She concludes her research by saying that "young MPs in general, and young women in particular, may be easier to side-line from power than their middle-aged colleagues" (p.274).

The backgrounds of women nominated through quotas

Darhour (2020) examines the effect of the gender quotas in Morocco where legislative seats are reserved (that is - **not** closed list candidate placement). She discusses "the ways in which the state and male political elites respond positively to calls for reform of gender policies without relinquishing any of their power" (p.280). She describes gender quotas not as protective strategies for women, but rather as "protective of the status quo," and **women in parliament as "democratic accessories scaffolding the democratization process"** (p.280).

Based on interviews with members of parliament (MPs), women's rights activists, and academics in Morocco from 2003 to 2017, the author notes that **party leaders nominate their blood relations**, wives and relatives for seats, many of whom have no background in politics or in women's rights movements. She also says that **the reserved seat system creates a division among the constituents of the women's movement**, members of women's sections in political parties, and civil society activists who aspire to be recruited into specific political parties.

Darhour (2020) ends by **recommending the closed list system with placement quotas instead of the reserved seat system**: "It remains that the best solution for the Moroccan version of [reserved seats] is to diversify the paths of women's entry to the parliament by introducing new institutional mechanisms ensuring that women are not downgraded and

stigmatized because of the quota that got them elected, i.e., for instance candidate quotas for district seats by law, including rank order rules as in Algeria and the zipper-systems as in Tunisia” (p.298).

“It seems important, however, that quotas are not just imposed from above, but rest on grass root mobilization of women and the active participation of women’s organizations. Quotas in themselves do not remove all the other barriers for women’s full citizenship.”

Dahlerup (2009)

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