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# *Women and Democracy*

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Latin American democratic transitions were expected to bring about progress toward gender equality in state and society. Women's movements had mobilized extensively against authoritarian rule and developed close ties to grassroots movements, labor unions, and human rights groups. During the transition, feminists achieved positions of political leadership and demanded that political parties address gender issues. In response to pressure from these activists, many of the democratic governments that assumed power in the 1980s and 1990s made commitments to boost women's political representation, legislate gender equality, and introduce public policies to improve women's lives. Have democratic governments achieved these objectives? Although in no democracy do women participate in and influence public life equally to men, by the end of the 1990s, women's visibility and influence had risen dramatically. Democracy expanded women's opportunities to participate in politics as elected officeholders, in social movement and interest group organizations, and as voters. The region's elected officials adopted quota laws establishing a minimum level for women's participation as candidates in national elections, introduced legislation to eradicate domestic violence, and created hundreds of women's police stations to receive victims of violence.

This chapter offers an overview of women's participation in democratic politics in Latin America and analyzes the policy performance of democratic governments on women's rights issues. Democracy enabled women to gain access to positions of power in record numbers and created a climate receptive to demands for gender equality. Yet even when national governments approved new policy frameworks or discursive shifts, they rarely allocated funds and adapted institutions to implement new laws and policies. Latin American democracies have been more successful integrating women into formal structures of political power than modifying political structures to

meet the demands of gender equality. While the number of women in positions of power has grown, democratic performance on women's rights laws and policies has been uneven. Even when a "critical mass" of women is in power, they are not always able or willing to unite and bring about advances in women's rights. In most cases, women owe their primary loyalty to their parties, not to other women politicians. Democracy, moreover, has facilitated the mobilization of coalitions opposed to change on certain gender issues, particularly abortion. Although democracy has given much to celebrate in terms of women's achievements, democratic performance also offers grounds for disappointment. Women are better off than before, but gender equity remains a distant ambition.

### **Democratic Inputs: Modes of Women's Participation in Politics**

Democratic governance has expanded women's opportunities to participate in politics and made women's rights issues increasingly prominent on national policy agendas. Yet the nature and outcomes of women's participation are complex. Record numbers of women are present in national decision making, although there continues to be significant variation across countries. Latin American civil societies have spawned numerous women's groups and movements with diverse interests and objectives. Yet the diversity of women's interests makes collective action toward a common agenda more difficult. Women make up more than half the electorate in most countries, and studies reveal some distinctive tendencies in women's voting. Still, there is little evidence that gender gaps or gender issues are decisive in determining electoral outcomes.

### ***Women in Decision Making***

The consolidation of democratic procedures in Latin America has coincided with impressive increases in women's presence in political decision making.<sup>1</sup> The gains are most dramatic in national legislatures. In 1990, women occupied an average of only 5 percent and 9 percent of the seats in the Senate and in the lower house of Congress, respectively; by 2002, this had increased to 13 and 15 percent. As Table 6.1 shows, however, there is significant variation across different countries. Women's presence among ministers has grown as well: in 1990, women made up 9 percent of ministers, in 2000, 13 percent. In several countries, including Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Panama, and Venezuela, women occupied one-fifth to one-quarter of ministerial posts in 2000. Women's representation among mayors and governors, however, is still low. Women were 5 percent of mayors in 1990, and 6 percent in 2000. In global terms, the Latin Ameri-

Table 6.1. Women in Political Office in Latin America

Country	Women Ministers, 2000 (in percents)	Women in Chamber of Deputies (or in unicameral Parliament), 2002 (in percents)	Women in Senate, 2002 (in percents)
Argentina	8	31	36
Bolivia	0	12	4
Brazil	0	7	6
Chile	25	13	4
Colombia	19	12	13
Costa Rica	18	35	—
Cuba	10	28	—
Dominican Republic	8	16	7
Ecuador	7	15	—
El Salvador	25	10	—
Guatemala	8	9	—
Honduras	26	9	—
Mexico	16	16	16
Nicaragua	8	21	—
Panama	25	10	—
Paraguay	8	3	18
Peru	7	18	—
Uruguay	0	12	10
Venezuela	21	10	—
Average	13	15	13

can average lags behind that of the Nordic countries, is comparable to Asia and the rest of Europe, slightly ahead of Sub-Saharan Africa, and well ahead of the Arab states.

Women's growing presence in national political decision making is attributable to several factors. The first is an overall expansion in women's capabilities and opportunities. Women's life expectancy increased from 54 years in the 1950s to 73 years in 1999. In 1970, women made up 23 percent of the labor force; by 1999, women represented 35 percent of the labor force overall. Fertility dropped from six children per woman in the 1950s to 2.6 in 1999. Women make up half of secondary school students and half of post-secondary students.<sup>2</sup> Second, the transition to democracy in the region created conditions for the emergence of women's social movements. During the transition period, political parties reached out to include and co-opt these movements, drawing many women into leadership ranks.

The final factor influencing women's opportunities to gain access to power is public attitudes about women's leadership. In a study of public opinion in five Latin American countries conducted by Gallup on behalf of the Inter-American Dialogue and the Inter-American Development Bank in

October 2000, 57 percent of those surveyed said that having more women in political office would lead to better government. People also held women to be superior to men in dealing with a range of issues and problems, including historically male-dominated areas like economic policy and foreign affairs. Sixty-two percent expressed the belief that women leaders would do better than men at reducing poverty, 72 percent at improving education, 57 percent at combating corruption, 64 percent at protecting the environment, 59 percent at managing the economy, and 53 percent at conducting diplomatic relations.

Yet these factors suggest that women's presence in power should register gradual increases. In fact, in the mid- to late 1990s, and early 2000s, there was a dramatic surge in women's representation in several countries. In Argentina, women's presence in the Chamber of Deputies skyrocketed from 6 to 30 percent, and in the Senate, from 3 to 36 percent; in Costa Rica's Congress, women's representation increased from 14 to 35 percent; in Ecuador from 4 to 17 percent; and in Peru's Congress, from 11 to 18 percent. The surge suggests that other factors besides the gradual growth in women's capabilities, changing attitudes, and the pace of democratization are at work. Indeed, a growing number of Latin American governments are acting consciously to boost women's presence in power by introducing quotas and other affirmative action measures. In the 1990s, 11 Latin American countries adopted quota laws establishing a minimum level of 20 to 40 percent for women's participation as candidates in national elections, and Colombia enacted a law requiring that women comprise 30 percent of senior public sector decision makers (Venezuela, however, has since rescinded its quota law).

Table 6.2 shows that, with the exception of Argentina, the region's quota laws were passed within a very short period of time. This simultaneity of policy change across many countries points to an international or regional explanation. In fact, most countries adopted quotas in the years following the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 and a series of key regional meetings between Latin American women politicians. In May 1995, Latin American congresswomen gathered at the Latin American Parliament in São Paulo to discuss Argentina's quota experiment and quota politics around the world. The regional meeting served as "the spark that ignited a call to action" on behalf of quotas for women politicians in many countries.<sup>3</sup> Later in the year, the Platform for Action adopted by the world's governments in Beijing endorsed the goal of ensuring "women's equal access to and full participation in decision-making." Among other measures, the Platform called on governments to adopt affirmative action policies to achieve the equal representation of women and men.<sup>4</sup> The Beijing and São Paulo conferences of 1995, as well as other regional meetings, generated policy ideas in the minds of Latin American women politicians, helped unite

**Table 6.2. Quota Laws in Latin America**

Country	Date of Law	Legislative Body	Quota (in percents)	Women before Law (in percents)	Women after Law (in percents)	Change (in percent points)
Argentina	1991	Chamber	30	6	30	+24
		Senate	30	3	36	+33
Bolivia	1997	Chamber	30	11	12	+1
		Senate	25	4	4	0
Brazil	1997	Chamber	30	7	6	-1
Costa Rica	1997	Unicameral	40	14	35	+21
Dominican Republic	1997	Chamber	25	12	16	+4
Ecuador	1997	Unicameral	20	4	15	+11
Mexico	1996	Chamber	30	17	16	-1
		Senate	30	15	16	+1
Panama	1997	Unicameral	30	8	10	+2
Paraguay	1996	Chamber	20	3	3	0
		Senate	20	11	18	+7
Peru	1997	Unicameral	25	11	18	+7
Average				9	17	+8

Source: Mala Htun and Mark Jones, "Engendering the Right to Participate in Decisionmaking: Electoral Quotas and Women's Leadership in Latin America," in *Gender and the Politics of Rights and Democracy in Latin America*, ed. Nikki Craske and Maxine Molyneux (London: Palgrave, 2002) and author's calculations based on recent election results.

women around the idea of the quota, and legitimized the idea of quotas at the global level.<sup>5</sup> Presidential interest has also been important. Presidents and other male politicians supported quotas out of embarrassment over the low levels of women's representation in their countries, the desire to court women's votes and the support of women politicians, and the need to meet commitments made in the Beijing Platform for Action and other international documents such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).<sup>6</sup>

On average, quotas have helped to boost women's presence in the legislature by 8 percentage points, an impressive increase from one election to the next. Yet the effects of quotas have varied significantly across countries. In only four circumstances (the Argentine Chamber of Deputies and Argentine Senate, the Costa Rican Congress, and the Paraguayan Senate) did women's presence rise to approach the level contemplated in the quota law. In other cases, such as the Chamber of Deputies of Bolivia, Brazil, Mexico, Panama, and Paraguay, and the Senates of Bolivia and Mexico, quotas coincided with only minimal gains in women's representation.<sup>7</sup> The variation in the success of quotas in getting women elected depends on the details of the laws themselves and the nature of the electoral system to which the laws are applied.

To be most effective, the quota law must be obligatory, must offer details of how the quota is to be implemented by political parties, and must contain a placement mandate for women candidates. This is not the case in all countries. For example, Brazil's quota law amounts to a recommendation rather than an obligation. The law requires parties to *reserve* 30 percent of positions on party lists for women, but does not oblige parties to actually *fill* these slots with women candidates. Since Brazilian electoral regulations allow parties to offer 50 percent more candidates than seats disputed in a district, a party can theoretically run a full slate without any women on the ticket.<sup>8</sup> As a result, in Brazil's 1998 elections, women made up, on average, a mere 10 percent of candidates. Similarly, because it is vague, the Mexican quota law does not prohibit parties from complying with the quota by including women on the ballot as alternates or *suplentes*. In the Mexican elections of July 2000, parties and coalitions complied with the quota, but only because women made up a disproportionate number of the *suplentes* for legislative elections. For example, in the race for the 200 seats in the Chamber of Deputies filled through proportional elections, about 60 percent of the *suplentes* on the lists of the three main parties/coalitions were women.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, to be effective, quota laws must contain a placement mandate forbidding parties from clustering women candidates at the bottom of party lists. The Argentine Ley de Cupos, or Quota Law (1991), requires that women be placed in *electable* positions, which has been interpreted to mean that every third (and sixth, ninth, etc.) slot on the list be occupied by a woman. Party compliance with these placement mandates is largely responsible for the success of the Argentine law in boosting women's presence in the Chamber of Deputies from 6 to 30 percent, and in the Senate, from 3 to 36 percent.<sup>10</sup> The Bolivian and Paraguayan quota laws also contain placement mandates; the law in the Dominican Republic does not. The Costa Rican law originally contained no placement mandate, although in 2000, the Supreme Electoral Court issued a ruling interpreting the law to mean that women must be placed in electable positions on lists for legislative elections.<sup>11</sup> After the ruling establishing placement mandates, women's presence in Costa Rica's Congress climbed from 19 to 35 percent.

A country's electoral system also conditions the impact of quotas. Quotas work best in proportional elections when legislators are elected through closed lists in large districts. In closed-list systems, voters vote for a party list, not an individual candidate. The party list contains a rank ordering of candidates set by party leaders that determines the order in which candidates from the list gain a seat. In this system, party leaders can place women in high positions on the party list to maximize their chances of getting elected. In open-list systems, by contrast, voters vote for individual candidates, whose chances of gaining a seat depend on the individual votes they receive. Open-

list elections involve competition among candidates within each party for individual votes in addition to competition across parties, which tends to put women candidates at a disadvantage. Furthermore, quotas tend to work better in higher district magnitudes; that is, when more candidates are elected from a single electoral district. The larger the district, the larger the number of candidates from any single party who will get elected, and the greater the opportunities for women who may be in lower positions on party lists. The open-list system helps to explain the disappointing results of quotas in Brazil and Panama. In countries with mixed electoral systems (Bolivia and Mexico), where part of the legislature is elected through proportional representation and part through plurality elections in single-member districts, quotas do not apply to plurality elections, reducing their impact on the composition of the legislature as a whole.

### *Collective Action*

Gender-related collective action in Latin America has historically come in two forms. In the first place, women have used their gender identity as a resource to mobilize around issues of common political concern. "Women's traditional roles as wives and mothers stimulate and legitimate their social protests and political participation."<sup>12</sup> In Brazil in the early 1960s and Chile in the early 1970s, groups of women deployed their gender identities in protests against the rising cost of living and food shortages. In Argentina in the 1980s, the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo (Mothers of Plaza de Mayo) used gender identities as a resource to demand government accountability in human rights. The 1985 Mexico City earthquake provoked the formation of women's groups to provide emergency assistance and restore basic services to devastated neighborhoods, and women organized to create communal kitchens in Peru during the economic crisis of the 1980s.<sup>13</sup> These women's groups have policy objectives that are not gender-specific, yet they use gender as a resource to generate political mobilization and to enhance their legitimacy.

Second, issues of women and gender have served as the focal point for the political mobilization of citizens including, but not limited to, women. During the political battles surrounding the legalization of divorce in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Colombia, both the partisans and opponents of divorce organized public demonstrations, marches, petition campaigns, and elite lobbying networks. Public debates about abortion provoked the mobilization of liberals favoring the expansion of the grounds of legal abortion as well as conservatives seeking constitutional prohibitions on abortion under all circumstances. In the 1990s, national and international networks emerged to increase public awareness and lobby on behalf of issues like domestic vio-

lence, women's reproductive health, the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, and women's legal rights.<sup>14</sup>

How has the consolidation of democratic procedures affected these two modes of gender-related mobilization? To a certain extent, conditions of authoritarian rule in Latin America proved conducive to the mobilization of women on the basis of their gender identities. By proscribing political parties and labor unions, authoritarian governments created incentives for citizens to organize around identities such as gender. Women mobilized around gender to defend human rights, demand greater social service provision in low-income neighborhoods, and protest population control programs. The military's assumption that women were "apolitical," moreover, exempted women's organizations from the repression exercised by the state against other groups.<sup>15</sup> As numerous scholars have documented, women's groups served as crucial interlocutors in the broader coalitions seeking to bring about a return to civilian rule in the region.

The return to civilian rule and the consolidation of democratic governance lifted restrictions on political organization and citizen mobilization. This created many more opportunities for women to be politically active, but also reduced the comparative advantage of gender-specific organizations as conduits for social demands. As a result, many women who had entered politics during the struggle against authoritarian rule left gender-specific organizations for political parties and other "traditional" organizations like labor unions. As Chilean politician Adriana Muñoz puts it, "Whereas previously one could speak of a 'women's movement,' now it is more appropriate to speak of 'women in movement.'"<sup>16</sup> The dispersal of politically active women throughout political and civil society generated the impression that with the democratic transition women's movements lost strength and vitality. Moreover, the disappearance of the overarching objective of the return to civilian rule, which had previously served to unite diverse groups of women, led to greater fragmentation among women's movements.

Many of the women's groups that persisted into the 1990s were not the spontaneous political organizations of the authoritarian period but NGOs with a professional staff. "NGO-ization," a term coined by Sonia Álvarez to refer to the "increased specialization and professionalization" of feminist sectors of the women's movement, is one of the most prominent trends identified by scholars in the 1990s. Women's NGOs involved in the provision of services to women, the lobbying of governments, and consultation with state agencies and international institutions have multiplied across Latin America. Some observers complain that NGO-ization, by building financial linkages between women's organizations and the state, mutes the former's capacity for critical political interventions. There are also concerns that the

increased professionalization of women's groups has jeopardized their connections to "popular" women.<sup>17</sup>

In summary, although the consolidation of democratic procedures reduced the competitive advantage of gender-specific organizations, it also expanded opportunities for women's participation in both women's and mixed groups. Although some observers lament the fragmentation and dispersion of the women's movement of the past, the multiplication of the venues and forms of women's collective action in the 1990s attests to the diversity of women and their interests in Latin America.

### Voting

Besides serving as elected officeholders or working in civil society organizations, women participate in the political process by voting. How do women's votes affect democratic politics? This section analyzes the question of whether there are any discernible tendencies in women's voting and then examines the impact of these tendencies on national elections. There is some evidence that women's historic tendency to vote for parties of the Right has shifted in some countries, although it is not clear that this gender gap makes a difference for electoral outcomes.

### The Gender Gap?

Electoral research has long confirmed the existence of a small but persistent "gender gap" in many countries. Initially remarked upon by European and North American scholars such as Maurice Duverger and Seymour Martin Lipset in the 1950s and 1960s, the gender gap referred to the fact that while women tended to support Center-Right parties and candidates, men were more likely to endorse parties and candidates of the Left. Data from the early 1970s revealed that the difference between male and female support for parties of the Left was as great as 14 percentage points in Italy, 13 percentage points in Germany, and 9 percentage points in Great Britain.<sup>18</sup> Scholars commonly explained female conservatism as a function of their greater religiosity, longer lifespans, and lower trade union membership.<sup>19</sup> Beginning in the 1980s, however, there were signs that women in many established democracies were realigning away from the Right and toward parties and candidates of the Left. Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris characterize women's electoral realignment as a movement from a "traditional gender gap" to a "modern gender gap," and attribute the transition to value changes provoked by a transformation in sex roles in postindustrial societies. Meanwhile, "traditional" gender gaps persisted in many developing countries.

Evidence from some Latin American countries affirms the existence of a

"traditional" gender gap. The thesis of female conservatism reaches back into the early history of Latin American electoral politics. "Progressive" leaders such as Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico withdrew their support for woman suffrage on the grounds that it would strengthen the electoral position of conservative parties. Ecuadorian liberals were similarly afraid of women's allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church and believed that women would be susceptible to the influence of priests at election time. In Ecuador and in Chile, conservative parties, and in Mexico, a conservative administration, granted women the vote in order to expand their electoral bases. In other countries, namely, Brazil, Peru, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and Paraguay, woman suffrage was adopted through decrees issued by dictators.<sup>20</sup>

In Chile, women have tended to vote for parties and candidates of the Right, leading to the most pronounced gender gap in the region. In the 1960s, 73 percent of women, compared to 56 percent of men, voted for parties of the Right or for the Christian Democrats.<sup>21</sup> Inglehart and Norris' data from the World Values Survey indicate that in the early 1990s, the gender gap in voting preferences in Chile was among the most pronounced among the thirty-six countries in the sample, and continued to be visible even when controlling for social structure and cultural beliefs.<sup>22</sup> The gender gap persisted through Chile's 1999 presidential election. Right candidate Joaquín Lavín received 51 percent of women's votes, while 49 percent of women voted for Socialist Party leader Ricardo Lagos. The Lagos-Lavín gap was even more pronounced among men, however, with 54 percent casting their votes for Lagos and 46 percent for Lavín.<sup>23</sup>

Data from Mexico and Brazil show that women are less likely to support parties of the Left than are men, although male and female support for parties of the Right is about equal. Polling data gathered around the time of Mexican elections in 1988 and 1991 revealed that the left-wing PRD drew considerably more support from men than from women, while the traditional PRI drew more support from women. (Support for the Right-of-Center National Action Party [PAN] was about equal.)<sup>24</sup> This trend continued into the later 1990s. Poll data gathered around the time of the 1997 elections for the mayor of Mexico City demonstrated that even when one controls for education, religiosity, political interests, and other variables, women were more reluctant to support the PRD than men.<sup>25</sup> In Brazil's 1998 presidential elections, 29 percent of men claimed to support the candidate of the Left (Workers' Party leader Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva), compared to a mere 24 percent of women. Male and female support for President Fernando Henrique Cardoso was about equal (49 percent of men polled supported him, compared to 48 percent of women).<sup>26</sup> In Argentina, World Values Survey points to a gender gap, but in the opposite direction from Chile, Mexico, and Brazil.<sup>27</sup>

The small gender gap characterizing the preferences of the mass electorate

(1994), the Declaration of the Summit of the Americas held in Miami in 1994, and the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), Latin American governments committed themselves to a wide array of policy measures to promote gender equality. In the late 1990s, the region's leaders acted quickly to fulfill their international obligations without contemplating seriously all the institutional and procedural changes necessary to carry out the new initiatives. For example, many governments adopted legislation creating policies to eradicate violence against women without adapting the national budget to allocate funds for these policies. Similarly, some countries approved quota laws without the implementing legislation or electoral reform necessary to make quotas work.

Second, women's participation in leadership is not always effective, and women's political alliances are not sufficiently powerful or durable to pressure for change in all areas and to oversee implementation of new policies. To be sure, in the 1990s, as women's presence in decision making grew to reach a "critical mass" in some countries, women from different political parties and social sectors came together in political alliances to push for law and policy advances on gender issues. Yet women's participation is not sufficient to guarantee effective policy changes benefiting women. To explain the causes and conditions of sustainable policy, we must explore the possibilities and limitations of women's expanded participation in leadership. Even when women decision makers are present in greater numbers, they will not always be interested in promoting women's issues or able to ally with women from other parties. Nor do women necessarily have the power to promote change.

### *The Effects of Women's Presence in Leadership on Policy Outcomes*

Evidence demonstrates that women's greater presence in power shifts the terms of legislative debates and introduces new items to the policy agenda. Studies from the United States have shown that women are more likely than men to raise concerns and sponsor legislation related to the family, equal opportunity, childcare policy, and reproductive health.<sup>42</sup> Linda Stevenson's study of bills on domestic violence and quotas in Mexico showed that legislative activity on these women's rights issues was related to changes over time in the number of women in the Congress.<sup>43</sup> Htun and Jones' data on committee membership and bill introduction in Argentina revealed that women are more likely than men to sit on congressional committees dealing with issues deemed to be of traditional concern to women and to sponsor bills in the "women's rights" and "children and families" issue areas.<sup>44</sup> A survey of legislators in the Brazilian Congress affirmed that women were significantly more likely than men to support the continuation of quota laws in

Congress and the extension of quotas to the executive branch, the criminalization of sexual harassment, the allocation of more public funds on gender equality policies, the payment of maternity leave by social security service, and the granting of tax incentives to businesses in exchange for hiring more women workers.<sup>45</sup>

These studies suggest that women's presence in power has served an agenda-setting goal. Yet there is a large gap between agenda setting and policy outcomes. Even when many women are present in power, they do not always act together on behalf of other women. Why? First, party discipline frequently prevents women from different parties from uniting in cross-partisan coalitions. Party loyalty may overpower gender identity in legislative politics. Based on interviews with eighty Mexican women in politics, Victoria Rodríguez concludes that "women's political loyalties, first and foremost, rest with the political party or organization to which they belong. Gender loyalty, for all practical purposes, comes in (a distant) second."<sup>46</sup> Another study of Mexico found that multipartisan alliances of women were successful in achieving their objectives only when these did not contradict party interests. When party interests diverged, as in the case of quota laws, protection of women in the workplace, and abortion, women's alliances were significantly weakened and legislation was not enacted. Gender-related policy changes came about only when the interests of the various parties coincided, as in the case of domestic violence.<sup>47</sup>

Second, questions of gender equality have not been among the top priorities of most women in decision-making positions. In Argentina, data show that 33 percent of women legislators presented a third or more of their bills in the women's rights area and 11 percent in the children and families area, but 58 percent of the women legislators presented no bills in women's rights and 61 percent presented no bills in children and families.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, almost no one makes gender equality issues a centerpiece of their political campaign. One Argentine politician noted that "men have convinced women that talking about women's issues is of little importance. Women, in order to be important politically, can't talk about gender issues."<sup>49</sup> Moreover, most women who have achieved power owe their positions to mentors—usually male party leaders or relatives—and not to other women. Rodríguez maintains that in Mexico, women's "solidarity and loyalty rest with policies and programs, political patrons and mentors, career plans and ambitions—not with the other women in the party."<sup>50</sup>

Third, women in power have different positions on policy issues and different ideas about what constitutes women's interests. In the United States, for example, political movements of women have taken sharply opposing sides on some of the key policy issues affecting women, such as the proposed Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the U.S. Constitution as well as the

constitutional status of first trimester abortions.<sup>51</sup> In Latin America, women have been active in both feminist reproductive rights movements advocating an expansion of the conditions of legal abortion as well as in pro-life movements lobbying for constitutional bans on abortion under all circumstances.<sup>52</sup> The existence of a common gender identity in no way implies that women have uniform interests, even on issues that affect women.

Finally, few women in elected office actually wield significant power.<sup>53</sup> Although there are some notable exceptions, party presidents, the presidents of important congressional commissions, leaders of party blocs in Congress, and other key posts have continued to be held by men. Few women have been present in the groups and settings where behind-the-scenes decisions are made. One Mexican politician observed that the circles of power were constructed over the course of many years, and trace their roots to an era when women did not enjoy the social position and opportunities they do today. The rules of the political game were constructed as men's rules, and their endurance marginalizes women in practice without the need for men to discriminate actively.<sup>54</sup> Even when many women enjoy formal titles and offices, the fact that the nature of power remains predominantly masculine means that few women have it.

### *Explaining Gender-related Policy Changes*

If the presence of a critical mass of women in power is not sufficient to guarantee effective policy changes on women's rights issues, how can policy be explained? Understanding the causes and conditions of law and policy changes requires exploring the institutional configurations that enhance or decrease the influence of *all* actors with a stake in gender issues. My own study, which attempted to account for policy change on family law, the legalization of divorce, and the conditions of legal abortion in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, found that women's participation was important for policy change, but did not tell the whole story.<sup>55</sup> Some progressive advances in law and policy were brought about by professional lawyers, liberal politicians, and even dictators. Nor was democratic governance always associated with policy advances on women's rights. In Argentina and Brazil, for example, reforms benefiting women were introduced under both military and democratic rule. The authoritarian government of Getulio Vargas in Brazil in the 1930s and 1940s not only granted women the vote but also expanded the conditions of legal abortion to include women who had been raped, a move that went beyond existing laws in most of Europe as well as the United States. The Brazilian military government of General Geisel legalized divorce in 1977 and altered the marital property regime to grant women more rights. Civil code reforms granting married women full civil capacity and

equalizing property relations within marriage were promulgated by the government of General Juan Carlos Onganía in Argentina in 1968.

The study demonstrated that gender-related reforms depended on the opening of institutional "policy windows" allowing issue networks of feminists, professional lawyers, and liberal politicians to enact changes in the law. In the case of divorce, windows opened when governments clashed with Roman Catholic bishops. In the case of family law reforms and early-twentieth-century reforms to abortion law, windows opened when state leaders appointed expert commissions to propose modernizing laws to civil and criminal laws in line with international standards. By contrast, abortion became more difficult to reform by the late twentieth century. Although democratic governance enabled advocates of abortion law liberalization to lobby public authorities, democracy also created conditions for anti-abortion groups to organize and expand their influence. The simultaneous mobilization of the feminist reproductive rights movement and the pro-life movement raised the stakes and reinforced the obstacles to policy change. In short, explaining policy change requires studying, not merely the presence of women in the state, but sequences of interactions among various social groups and institutions including Roman Catholic bishops, feminist activists, liberal lawyers, reformist politicians, conservative interest groups, and dictators.

### **Conclusion**

Women's participation in democratic politics in Latin America gives cause for celebration and concern. The growth in women's presence in decision making, the explicit commitments made by governments to principles of sex equality, and official attention to gender-related problems like domestic and sexual violence are reasons to celebrate. The situation of many Latin American women has improved from decades ago. On the other hand, new policies suffer from mediocre implementation, making women's rights more abstract than concrete. The gap between law and practice and the failure of many new female decision makers to exercise effective leadership constitute deficiencies in democratic politics. Although partially a function of women's diverse interests and the dynamics of democratic party competition, the difficulties faced by women leaders in organizing more durable political coalitions reflects continued male bias in political institutions and the masculine culture of power in the region.

What will it take to enhance women's influence and deepen the policy changes under way? The adaptation of the culture of power to women's presence in decision making is a long-term process. Transformations in the social practices surrounding gender relations provoked by demographic, socio-economic, and technological changes may eventually "filter up" to influence

men's and women's willingness to submit to women's authority. In the shorter term, male leaders can help to forge new norms of power by demonstrating in public that they take women seriously as decision makers. Overall, improving democratic performance on women's rights issues depends on the consolidation of democratic governance in general. Poor governance—institutional failure, poor law enforcement, corruption, inefficiency, lack of accountability—thwarts policy implementation. Profound social inequalities, including variation in the status of women across region, class, and ethnic group, limit the reach of new policies designed to improve women's lives. Translating women's abstract rights into concrete rights demands that these dilemmas of democratic governance be resolved.