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Lessons from a Late Adopter: Feminist Advocacy, Democratizing Reforms, and Gender Quotas in Chile

Jennifer M. Piscopo[1], Gwynn Thomas[2], Peter Siavelis[3], and Magda Hinojosa[4]

Abstract

Many Latin American and other Global South countries adopted gender quotas during democratic transitions. What explains late-adopting cases like Chile? We analyze two instances: the 2015–2016 electoral reforms, which finally introduced a 40-percent gender quota, and the 2020–2023 constitutional process, which introduced gender parity. Using a qualitative analysis that draws on 39 elite interviews, we posit that efforts to redesign national political institutions in order to address democratic deficits create transition-like moments. In turn, these moments create windows of opportunity for quota advocates. We show how quota advocates in the parties, congress, and civil society leveraged growing voter discontent to pressure their resistant colleagues and ultimately secure gender quotas (and later gender parity) as part of larger reform efforts. Our analysis of the Chilean case elevates two factors explaining quota adoption: the long arc of democratization and women's role as protagonists in electoral reforms.

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Keywords

Gender quotas, democratization, political representation, electoral reforms, Chile

[1]Department of Politics, International Relations, and Philosophy, Royal Holloway University of London, Egham, UK
[2]Department of Global Gender and Sexuality Studies, University at Buffalo, State University of New York, Buffalo, NY, USA
[3]Department of Political Science and International Affairs, Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC, USA
[4]School of Politics and Global Studies, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, USA

Corresponding Author:
Jennifer M. Piscopo, Department of Politics, International Relations, and Philosophy, Royal Holloway University of London, Egham Hill, Egham TW20 0EX, UK.
Email: Jennifer.Piscopo@rhul.ac.uk

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In 1991, Argentina transformed electoral politics by adopting the first national gender quota law for women candidates. Other Latin American and Global South countries followed, leading scholars to highlight how the third wave of democratization opened a window of opportunity for gender quota adoption (Archenti and Tula, 2017; Bareiro and Soto, 2015; Fallon et al., 2012; Htun and Jones, 2002; Kang and Tripp, 2018). International norms underscoring the link between inclusive representation and democracy dovetailed with women's rights activists' claims that affirmative action would remedy women's political exclusion and improve political representation. Democratic transitions meant that quota advocates—networks of elite women in the parties, the state, and civil society—made these arguments at moments when countries were redesigning their political institutions. By 2000, 12 Latin American countries had adopted quotas.

This paper turns to those quota laws that came later, farther from actual democratic transitions. We examine the Chilean case, which offers two instances to reflect on the relationship between democratization and quota adoption: the 2015–2016 electoral reforms, which introduced a 40-percent gender quota for women candidates to the national legislature, and the 2020–2023 constitutional process, which introduced gender parity for the two constitution-writing bodies. At first glance, Chile seems like an outlier: quota adoption occurred 25 years after its democratic transition, so quota adoption cannot be explained by women activists' ability to leverage transitions' window of opportunity. Alternative explanations also poorly fit the Chilean case. Chile is not an autocracy "pink washing" its misdeeds (Zetterberg and Bjarnegård, 2022). Nor is Chile an established European democracy where quotas spread via contagion from left parties (Meier, 2012; Verge, 2012) or where male elites supported statutory quotas to help manage intra- and interparty competition (Weeks, 2018).

Yet Chile *did* adopt first quotas and then parity during moments where voters' dissatisfaction with democracy's performance peaked in ways that pushed elites to undertake significant reforms. The 2015–2016 electoral reforms represented party leaders' efforts to address a long-brewing "crisis of representation," in which voters felt disconnected from and had lost confidence in the traditional parties (Castiglioni and Rovira Kaltwasser 2016; Figueroa Rubio, 2021; Siavelis, 2016). The 2020–2023 constitutional process began when social movements paralyzed the country in late 2019, as congress failed to deliver the economic and social reforms voters sought (Arce Riffo, 2021; Piscopo and Siavelis, 2021; Reyes-Housholder et al., 2023). In both moments, Chile undertook concerted, substantive efforts to redesign national political institutions in ways that would improve political representation and therefore democratic performance. Both moments opened windows of opportunity for quota adoption: with institutional change on the agenda, quota advocates could potentially advance their policy goals.

Chile's late adoption thus invites us to revisit the theoretical link between democratic transitions, women's advocacy during transition moments, and quota adoption. Between 2016 and 2022, we conducted 39 interviews with political elites and activists, to answer the question, Why and how did Chile adopt gender quotas/gender parity? Reading our interviews in light of the scholarship and in light of the political moments driving each

reform, we craft an explanation that takes the democratic transition literature's core insight—that transitions offer quota advocates windows of opportunity to adopt gender quotas—and adapts this insight to encompass late adoption. We conclude that efforts to address democratic deficits—specifically, efforts to address perceived failures of political representation—offer quota advocates similar windows of opportunity. If we consider (1) that efforts to improve political representation by redesigning national political institutions are efforts to deepen democracy and (2) that the connection between increasing women's descriptive representation and enhancing democratic outcomes persists in the public imagination (Clayton, O'Brien and Piscopo, 2019), then Chile's experience actually aligns with the literature's initial emphasis on democratic transitions. We conceptualize electoral system overhauls or constitutional processes as democratizing reforms. These reforms can occur without an actual transition, but they open a similar window through which advocates can link improving democratic performance to increasing women's representation. Our analysis of the Chilean case reveals that the combination of democratizing reforms and women's advocacy continues to fuel quota adoption.

We begin by reviewing the comparative literature on quota adoption. We then bring this literature's proffered explanations for quota adoption into dialogue with the literature on Latin America's electoral reforms in the years and decades after initial democratic transitions. Scholars explaining Latin American quota adoption have documented quota laws' initial passage alongside their strengthening via subsequent reforms (Hinojosa and Piscopo, 2013; Piscopo and Vázquez Correa, 2023). Yet these accounts have not appreciated how dependent quota adoption and evolution were on what Levitsky and Murillo (2013) call "serial replacement": Latin American countries' iterative electoral reforms that took place in the decades following democracy's return. By conceptualizing serial replacement as democratizing reforms, we demonstrate how windows of opportunity to secure quotas open well beyond democratic transitions' initial moments. Serially rewriting electoral rules and adopting quotas go together more often than not.

We next demonstrate how the Chilean case illuminates the core roles played by democratizing reforms and women's advocacy. Beginning with the 2015–2016 electoral system overhaul, our interview data reveal how a network of women party members, legislators, and activists leveraged elites' efforts to address Chile's crisis of representation, ensuring the reform included the 40-percent gender quota. Turning to the 2020–2023 constitutional process reinforces our central insight: that democratizing reforms open windows of opportunity to adopt gender quotas. When the 2015–2016 electoral redesign proved insufficient, and widespread social unrest in 2019 forced elites back to the drawing board, women's networks seized this opportunity to win gender parity for Chile's constitutional bodies. In particular, the strong gender parity mechanism used for electing the first assembly reflected protestors' and feminists' demands for an inclusive and representative convention.

We conclude by reiterating how our analysis of the Chilean case helps scholars unpack the puzzle of late quota adoption. Our analysis suggests that national-level institutional redesigns open windows of opportunity wherein quota advocates can leverage arguments

linking women's presence to improved democratic performance. As such, we elevate two factors explaining quota adoption: the long arc of democratization and women's role as protagonists in electoral reforms.

When and Why Do Countries Adopt Gender Quotas?

Electoral gender quotas use the state's coercive power to bring more women into politics than would be present otherwise. Latin America has been in the vanguard of quota development (Archenti and Tula, 2017; Bareiro and Soto, 2015; Hinojosa and Piscopo, 2013). Yet men have historically held most political power. So, why would men legislators vote for policies that lead to their own displacement (Valdini, 2019)?

This question matters especially in democracies, where authoritarians cannot unilaterally implement quotas to "pink wash" their regime (Zetterberg and Bjarnegård, 2022). Democratic or democratizing countries have more veto players and more complex processes for changing electoral rules, including the need to procure elite agreement across parties (Weeks, 2018). For this reason, we focus on quota adoption within emerging and established democracies. In these contexts, explanations for quota adoption have centered on: (1) international norms tying women's presence to democracy and modernity; (2) women's mobilization during democratic transitions, which allow women from parties, civil society, and the state to form advocacy networks; and (3) elite incentives shaped by party competition and electoral politics.

The first generation of quota adoption research regarded the first and second factors as linked. Women's movements mobilized as part of Global South countries' democratic transitions, joining and even leading the human rights and peace movements that brought about the transitions. Many women activists then entered and sought influence within parties (Waylen, 2003), but found themselves sidelined as men secured most candidacies and victories in the initial democratic elections (Hinojosa and Piscopo, 2013; Fallon, Swiss and Viterna, 2012). Gender quotas emerged in response to these disappointing results (Htun and Jones, 2002; Baldez, 2004; Piscopo, 2016). Quota advocates—women party members, elected officials, and civil society activists—argued that women's legislative representation would reinforce countries' credentials as democratic, modern, egalitarian states (Htun and Jones, 2002; Towns 2012). They contended that adopting gender quotas would correct discrimination against women, improve political representation, and raise countries' international standing—all in one go. The democratic transition itself made these normative and empirical claims salient, demonstrating how transitions opened windows of opportunity for quota adoption (Bush, 2011; Htun and Jones, 2002). Waylen (2015) describes democratization's early years as an "inflection point" in which new ideas about women's equal political representation gained traction just as elites were redesigning institutions.

A second generation of research acknowledges the importance of women's demands during democratic transitions but posits that this combination cannot explain men politicians' "true" reasons for acquiescing to quota adoption in either emerging or established democracies. Valdini (2019) argues that normative arguments and opportune moments

alone cannot explain men elites' calculus, since politicians are rarely angels moved to do good. Instead, male chief executives support quotas because they distract from corruption scandals or democratic backsliding (Valdini 2019).

Men parliamentarians might also adopt quotas to share their "burden" more widely. In Western Europe's established democracies, quotas began as voluntary efforts by left parties. Left parties then seek to make quotas mandatory, in order to impose quotas' costs—the displacement of men incumbents—on all parties equally (Murray, Krook, and Opello, 2012). In turn, right-leaning parties fear the electoral costs of allowing left-leaning parties the exclusive benefit of appearing women-friendly (Murray, Krook, and Opello, 2012; Verge, 2012). Building on this contagion theory, Weeks (2018) argues that elites adopt quotas to (a) prevent left parties from enjoying the public relations advantage of their voluntary measures or (b) reestablish control over candidate selection. Gatto (2016) also focuses on men elites' cost–benefit calculation, finding that electorally insecure men support quotas more readily, since they expect to lose their seats anyway.

This second generation of scholarship thus elevates men elites' incentives over the intersection between democratic transitions, international norms, and women's advocacy. However, rather than seeing these explanations as competing, we contend they are complementary. The first generation's emphasis on transitions' windows of opportunity also accounted for men elites' incentives. The normative arguments advanced by women advocates helped pressure male party leaders into adoption (Baldez, 2004; Bauer, 2008; Htun and Jones, 2002; Palma and Cerva, 2014). By holding press conferences and denouncing male party leaders as dinosaurs whose sexism would hold countries back (Baldez, 2004; Piscopo, 2016), women quota advocates imposed reputational costs on those men rejecting quotas. The weaknesses of initial quota laws also attracted men's support, as the laws contained multiple loopholes designed to evade compliance. Men party elites from Argentina to France could gain the domestic and international public relations benefits of appearing to support more inclusive representation, without actually needing to place women candidates in winning districts or viable list positions (Hinojosa and Piscopo, 2013; Krook, Murray, and Opello, 2012). As such, both generations of scholarship draw attention to men elites' rationales for adopting quotas. Yet what opens the window of opportunity outside democratic transitions?

In Chile, gender quotas—introduced repeatedly since 1994—finally passed as part of the 2015–2016 electoral system overhaul. Gender parity was then implemented for the 2020–2023 constitutional process. Both reforms occurred in response to persistent crises of political representation (Arce Riffo, 2021; Figueroa Rubio, 2021; Siavelis, 2016; Piscopo and Siavelis, 2021). The embeddedness of quotas, and later parity, in broader efforts to redesign national political institutions indicates that concerns about democratic performance can spur quota adoption outside of democratic transitions. Said another way, Chile's experience suggests that electoral reforms and constitutional revisions, when precipitated by crises of democratic performance, provide a transition-like moment—a window of opportunity for policy change akin to the one identified in early scholarship on quota adoption. To further explore the relationship between electoral

reform and quota adoption, we turn to other instances in which countries adopted quotas outside of democratic transitions.

Democratizing Reforms, the Serial Replacement of Electoral Rules, and Gender Quotas

Scholars studying quota adoption in the Global North have underscored the importance of arguments that paint women's equal representation as necessary for achieving democracies where men and women enjoy full, substantive equality (Lépinard and Rubio-Marin, 2018). Such arguments gain traction when elites are already undertaking electoral reforms (Celis, Krook and Meier, 2011). As Norris (1997) contends, electoral reforms always generate normative debates: different electoral arrangements produce different kinds of citizen-voter linkages and elites weigh the tradeoffs among them.

Political reforms in Italy and Belgium illuminate how moments of institutional change create windows of opportunity for quota adoption. In Italy over 2014–2017, then-Prime Ministers Matteo Renzi and Paolo Gentiloni wanted to transform Italy into a modern democracy. Supported by young politicians keen to align Italy with Europe, Renzo and Gentiloni sought sweeping changes to the electoral system, public administration, education sector, and labor market (Doná, 2018). Italian women MPs seized this opportunity. Echoing arguments used by Argentine women in the 1990s, they argued that turning Italy into a modern democracy meant adopting quotas in order to advance gender equality (Doná, 2018). They matched their arguments to Renzi's and Gentiloni's objectives: improving Italy's democratic quality. Belgium similarly adopted its gender quota to address democratic deficits. The radical right's growing electoral victories in the 1990s forced the country's more moderate parties into a reckoning with their representational failures. This soul-searching created a window of opportunity for women party members, who argued that adopting quotas would remedy the crisis of representation and restore voters' confidence in parties and institutions (Meier, 2012: 374–375).

Arguments tying women's political representation to improved democratic performance can therefore operate outside transition moments, at times when political elites are pressed to renovate institutions. Such moments are not rare. While electoral reforms are most frequent during democratic transitions, they have, since 1945, become more prevalent in old and new democracies alike—and more likely to occur in response to popular mobilization against the status quo (Renwick, 2011).

Indeed, nascent democracies—like those in Latin America—began routinely renovating their electoral rules, a "serial replacement" that continued long after their initial transitions (Levitsky and Murillo, 2013). Latin America's 18 democratic Spanish- or Portuguese-speaking countries reformed their rules for electing legislators, presidents, or both 37 times between 1978 and 2002 (Remmer, 2008). Extending the time period six years and considering just constitutional or statutory reforms for electing national legislators, Negretto (2011) counted 32 reforms, most making the electoral system more proportional (by adding seats, districts, or both) and thus more representative. These reforms addressed the emerging democracies' "diverse performance problems": initial democratic

constitutions favored concentrations of executive power, and electoral reforms that facilitated multipartyism and improved inclusivity "respond[ed] to citizens' demands for better representation and public goods" (Negretto, 2011: 1778). By adjusting national political institutions gradually, serial replacement stabilized the newly democratic regimes. Since elites could sacrifice their entrenched interests piecemeal rather than all at once (Smith, 2012) and control which privileges they lost and when (Levitsky and Murillo, 2013), reversions to military rule were avoided.

Framing serial replacement as part of democratization's long tail does not mean elites were always or solely motivated by normative commitments to improve political representation (nor that reforms actually improved democratic performance). Still, each *democratizing reform* constitutes a window of opportunity for quota advocates. Case studies of quota adoption in Latin America have acknowledged that quotas often pass as part of larger electoral reforms (Hinojosa and Piscopo, 2013; Piscopo, 2016), but they have not theorized this link explicitly.

Yet, over 30 years of quota adoption and reform in Latin America indicate that this relationship exists. Sixteen Latin American countries currently use quotas. Twelve countries revised their quota laws at least once, and the modal number of quota law reforms is three (Piscopo and Vázquez Correa, 2023). Updates usually closed loopholes that elites purposefully wrote into initial laws, such as neglecting to include rank-order rules for women's placement on electoral lists (Archenti and Tula, 2017; Hinojosa and Piscopo, 2013). Piscopo and Vázquez Correa (2023) count 16 first-round quota laws and 34 subsequent reforms. Checking this list against the United Nations' archive of quota statutes (CEPAL, 2023) shows that stand-alone quota laws—like Argentina's in 1991 and Uruguay's in 2009—are rare. Instead, most quota laws and revisions were contained in larger reforms to electoral or political party laws. Today, ten Latin American countries have gender parity. Advocates have framed gender parity as they once framed quotas—as necessary for improving democracy—and have taken advantage of ongoing serial replacement to secure these changes (Archenti and Tula, 2017; Bareira and Soto, 2015). Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Peru all adopted parity as part of larger electoral reforms, including those at the constitutional level (CEPAL, 2023).

Latin America's serial replacement of electoral rules therefore facilitated quota advocates' ability to first win gender quota statutes, and then to strengthen the laws and even transform them into parity. The story from new and established democracies is similar: redesigns of national political institutions create windows of opportunity through which women's networks can mobilize and gain traction around quotas. Elites face pressures to reform and quota advocates seize the moment by arguing that adding women helps meet reformers' goals of improving democracy.

Studying Democratizing Reforms in Chile

Bringing democratizing reforms into the quota adoption story sheds new light on *how* redesigns of national political institutions open windows of opportunity for quota adoption. This insight emerges from our analysis of the Chilean case (as described below), supported by the

literature on quota adoption, on the one hand, and democratization and electoral reforms, on the other hand (as described above). Our fieldwork in Chile pursued three lines of inquiry: (1) why the 2015–2016 electoral system reform happened when it did; (2) how elites expressed their incentives for reform; and (3) how networks of quota advocates—women in the parties, the state, and civil society—worked to secure the 40-percent quota. We developed questions corresponding to each line of inquiry and asked all respondents the same questions. We contacted individuals who played leading roles in the 2015–2016 reforms and sent formal invitations to their workplace email addresses. Overall, we interviewed 39 individuals, including party members and leaders, current and former legislators, and feminists in the executive branch and in civil society. Since respondents' exact roles differed, we followed a semistructured format that allowed more in-depth discussion of items matching interviewees' expertise or experience.

Interviews occurred over four visits between 2016 and 2018, with a fifth follow-up trip in 2022.[1] Since we focused on actors with pivotal roles in quota adoption, we interviewed more women than men (32 to seven), but men interviewees included party leaders on the left and right. Altogether, respondents spanned the ideological spectrum, including ten party members or leaders from the right, five from the center, and 16 from the left.

Interviews were conducted, transcribed, and analyzed in Spanish. Using the transcriptions, we extracted and organized quotes by line of inquiry, and we looked for patterns within each grouping. We found that interviewees coincided on key points: the 2015–2016 reforms sought to address Chile's perceived crisis of representation and this reform moment created an opportunity for quota advocates to organize inside and outside of congress.

Our analysis of respondents' narratives about the 2015–2016 electoral reform grounds our insight into the connection between democratizing reforms, windows of opportunity for quota advocates, and quota adoption. The timing of our last fieldwork trip—in March 2022—meant that our conversations inevitably covered the more recent past: the constitutional process launched in 2020 and the adoption of gender parity for the special electoral laws convening the constitution-writing bodies. Respondents described the constitutional process as yet another democratizing reform and explained how women activists insisted that any new constitution's legitimacy would hinge on women's fully equal participation in its creation. With our attention thus drawn to the similarity between the 2015–2016 electoral reforms and the 2020–2023 constitutional process, we posit that *both* moments show our main insight: significant efforts to improve democratic representation open windows of opportunity for quota adoption. Seen this way, we argue that Chile's late adoption fits rather than defies a regional pattern.

The Initial Absence of Serial Replacement in Chile

Chile's democratic transition began with the 1988 plebiscite, in which voters chose "no" on whether or not General Augusto Pinochet's authoritarian rule should continue. At this moment, Chile could have followed Argentina by adopting gender quota legislation. Women activists had mobilized during the dictatorship, denouncing human rights

abuses and leading a broad-based resistance movement that helped the pro-democratic coalition win the plebiscite (Chuchryk, 1994).

Central to the women's movement's critique of authoritarianism was women's subordination within the traditional family and exclusion from political power. Women activists argued that women's inclusion in the new democratic government was therefore essential, marching with banners demanding "democracy in the country and in the home" (Chuchryk, 1994). Yet while most left parties adopted party-level quotas, they routinely ignored these internal mandates (Hinojosa, 2005). The founding democratic elections of 1989 evinced how much parties sidelined women despite their activism during the transition: women won just six percent of chamber seats (Riquelme Parra, 2021: 249). The presidential victor, Patricio Aylwin, named just one woman to his cabinet—to head the National Women's Service. These disappointing results spurred networks of women from left parties and feminists to pressure for statutory quotas (Waylen, 2010). The first quota bill was introduced by women Concertación deputies in 1994 (Interview 22) but in contrast to neighboring Argentina (Marx, Borner and Caminotti 2007), arguments tying women's inclusion to improved democracy could not gain traction. Whereas other Latin American countries pursued democratizing reforms well beyond the transition moment, the political system Chile inherited from the Pinochet dictatorship promoted stability and resisted change (Figueroa Rubio, 2021; Waylen, 2010).

Stability Over Change. We suggest that Chile initially failed to adopt quotas because windows of opportunity—namely, the serial replacement of electoral rules—did not open in the transition's aftermath. The Concertación, the center-left coalition that emerged triumphant in the 1988 plebiscite, agreed to follow the 1980 Constitution written and adopted during the Pinochet regime. This dictatorship-era charter cast a long shadow, as it established numerous formal barriers to reforms. Among them was a unique electoral system—the so-called "binomial system"—which worked as follows: each chamber and senate district had two seats. To win both seats, a party would need to double the vote of the second-place finisher—a very high threshold. Parties thus had incentives to form and run in coalitions (one representing the right, one representing the left), which let the coalitions split each district since neither the right nor the left usually captured sufficient votes to win both seats. By ensuring the overrepresentation of right parties relative to their popularity in the electorate, the electoral system stymied the left's and center-left's ability to reach the constitution's required 3/5th super-majority for reform (Fuentes, 2012). Initiatives to scrap the binomial system were introduced during every Concertación government between 1992 and 2014 but never advanced due to the right's opposition.

Formal barriers to electoral reform combined with elites' prioritization of stability, as they feared any attempts to unwind Pinochet's legacy could trigger a reversion to military rule. This concern rendered much of the 1980 Constitution untouchable and a "politics of consensus" emerged (Figueroa Rubio, 2021; Siavelis, 2016). Nothing moved forward without agreement between the left and right coalitions; each coalition, in turn, sought unity among its disparate factions, limiting reforms to those palatable within and

between coalitions (Siavelis, 2016). During the first 25 years of democracy, left and right governments alike modified but never fundamentally altered the Pinochet-era's privatized healthcare, education, and pension systems (Castiglioni and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016; Pribble, 2017). The politics of consensus also sidelined the women's movements' demands, from gender quotas to other policy changes. In the 1990s, Chile made little progress on legalizing divorce and expanding reproductive rights, for example (Thomas 2019). Even as protests surged in the mid-2000s, governments made only modest attempts to address stark social and economic inequalities. By then, fears of military intervention had long passed, but center-left elites remained unwilling to pursue radical reform (Pribble, 2017).

The politics of consensus thus persisted well beyond its usefulness and explains the relative lack of serial replacement (alongside the absence of other fundamental economic and social reforms). Between 1989 and 2015, those electoral reforms that did occur targeted the subnational level: allowing the direct election of mayors (1996), separating elections for mayors and council members (2002), and directly electing regional councilors (2011). The only major redesign of national political institutions occurred in 2005, when left and right agreed to eliminate the nine appointed senators and limit the presidential term to four years.[2] While these reforms were democratizing—ensuring the direct election of all senators and increasing executive turnover—the binomial system went untouched.

Interviewees emphasized how the binomial system allowed elites to become insular, unresponsive, and unrepresentative during the 2000s and 2010s. A long-time party-member noted, "Renovation is necessary…but they never want to leave power: we have some parliamentarians who have been in power for 24 years and they're going to run again. So, we might have all this talk of renovation, but the reality is that the elites don't want to go; they want to stay in power" (Interview 26). Another concurred, explaining, "There is no renovation, there are some good leaders, but there is also a new generation of young politicians that have the skills and the knowledge, but they have no space to occupy" (Interview 4). Party leaders not only recognized the binomial system's flaws but also benefited from them: they understood the game and could play it to ensure their reelection and continued power (Siavelis, 2016).

No Window of Opportunity for Gender Quotas. A politics of consensus that limited debate and stymied reform kept any windows of opportunity for quota adoption closed. Elites' failure to accommodate new leaders also excluded women, further limiting their access to and influence over policymaking. The elites whom interviewees accused of not yielding power were largely men. Several interviewees referred to "caudillos" inside the party, a masculinized term that translates into "big men" or "big chiefs" (Interviews 6, 11). One explained, "In each party, there is a group with a certain level or style of 'big chief politics' and these 'big chiefs' are distinctive actors…they were the ones in charge" (Interview 6). Another recalled, "There was so much machismo in my [right] party; women would make coffee and take notes but not lead" (Interview 39).

Men essentially dominated party politics in Chile (Interviews 7, 9, 17, 22). Between 1989 and 2015, women never won more than 16% of seats in either the senate or

chamber (Batlle and Roque López, 2018: 64). As a long-time left party member noted, "Yes, women have little representation, and in general there have been various explanations presented, but power has always been with the men and if you look at the party's electoral [nominating] committees and the municipal governments, it is all men" (Interview 4).

Chilean women thus faced a system designed for stasis and dominated by male elites. Advocates frame quotas as addressing crises of representation and facilitating democratic renewal, but with institutional redesign off the table, such arguments cannot gain traction. Take President Michelle Bachelet's efforts during her first term (2006–2010). Representing the Concertación, which would have benefited from reforming the binomial system (and thus breaking the right's overrepresentation), Bachelet established an electoral reform commission. The two women members, Marcela Ríos Tobar and María de los Ángeles Fernández Ramil, strongly argued for quotas as part of this package (Arce Riffo, 2018). Ríos and Fernández, alongside other feminist activists and organizations such as Comunidad de Mujeres (Women's Community), Centro Regional de Derechos Humanos y Justicia de Género (Regional Center of Human Rights and Gender Justice), and Observatorio de Género (Gender Observatory), pointed out that, without a quota, Chile ranked among Latin America's worst performers for electing women.

Based on the commission's findings, Bachelet proposed a modest electoral reform package, including a 30-percent quota (Batlle and Roque López, 2018). Bachelet herself supported the quota (Thomas, 2019), likely an extension of her campaign promises to deliver pro-women change (Reyes-Housholder 2018, 2019). As a woman member of Bachelet's cabinet explained: "In 2007, we presented a gender quota law with an economic incentive [for parties to nominate women] and sanctions…. but it did not pass, and it was never even debated in the commission…. Because they [the opponents] did not think it was necessary" (Interview 1). Women's advocacy proved insufficient because institutional change was off-the-table: the window of opportunity did not exist. Most elites were unwilling to crack open the binomial system, so Bachelet's package could not advance.

Leveraging Electoral Reform to Win Gender Quotas

By the mid-2010s, Chile's democratic deficits had become too evident to ignore. Conservative Sebastián Piñera replaced Bachelet, and from 2010–2014, his center-right government consistently received low approval ratings. Protests spanned the Bachelet and Piñera presidencies. In 2011 alone, restive citizens staged about 150 rallies, some drawing half a million participants (Pribble, 2017: 53). Parties struggled to channel discontent, and voter registration and turnout declined, with voters' party identification dropping to just 29% in 2013 (Siavelis, 2016). Reflecting on this mood, interviewees again highlighted the disconnect between elites and voters: one commented that parties were "out of touch" and were being "held hostage by power-holders in their core" (Interview 22). Yet another described the parties as "seriously deteriorated" amid growing citizen discontent (Interview 6). Another argued that parties' inability to provide political representation led to the parties' discrediting and lack of legitimacy (Interview 9).

A Window of Opportunity. The 2014 elections created a favorable environment for electoral reform. Amidst ongoing protests, Bachelet formed a new coalition to launch her second presidential campaign. The Nueva Mayoría (NM) combined the traditional Concertación parties with the Communist Party and other newly formed left parties. The NM's 2014 campaign centered around tax reforms that would better fund education, health, and retirement benefits, and electoral reforms that would replace the binomial system with larger-magnitude districts elected by proportional representation.

The NM swept the elections, winning the presidency, 67 of 120 lower-house seats, and 21 of 38 senate seats. Their numbers reflected social movements' and voters' desire for substantive change (Figueroa Rubio, 2021), reforms that Bachelet herself also promised. If Bachelet could maintain support from the NM's distinctive factions, she would need just five more deputies and two more senators to reach the three-fifths supermajority. Fissures in the right-wing coalition, including more independents and splinter parties, created new opportunities to work across political divides (Gamboa and Morales, 2016). This political environment substantially changed elites' incentives relative to redesigning national political institutions (Gamboa and Morales, 2016).

Even as electoral reform appeared likely, thus opening the window of opportunity to secure quotas, advocates still needed to lobby. Bachelet included a 40-percent gender quota in the electoral reform she introduced following her election. Yet even within her coalition, support was not uniform and the internal politicking was "brutal" (Interview 9). On the one side, some NM members recognized that women's representation fell far below their percentage in the population and conceded that parties, not voters, were at fault, since voters chose women at the polls (Interview 9).

On the other side, opponents painted the quota as impractical. Given that women were usually about 15% of candidates (Interview 9) and that parties had generally failed to prepare new generations of leaders, some party members believed finding women candidates would be too arduous (Interviews 2, 12). A party woman explained, "parties need to have an important percentage of women, 40%, and clearly, we don't have that many women available to be candidates or even that many women interested in being candidates" (Interview 15). Moreover, party elites also felt that the quota would mean that "the requirement to include women will leave competitive candidates out" (Interview 12). In other words, quota detractors viewed men as competitive candidates and women as noncompetitive. Quota advocates would need to overcome this opposition.

Women's Quota Advocacy. Securing a supermajority in support of the quota required votes from the left and center. Advocates would especially need men's votes, given men's overrepresentation in congress (Arce Riffo, 2018). Negotiation would need to happen "legislator by legislator" (Interview 13). Advocates' ability to apply pressure was therefore crucial. Women legislators, civil society leaders, and Bachelet herself all worked to increase the costs associated with opposing the quota. Our interviews collectively highlight three interconnected strategies that quota advocates deployed to counter resistance: first, they mobilized the Chilean women's movement and feminist activist networks, which had long supported quotas, to convey the breadth of public support; second,

they created coalitions among women deputies and senators from across the political spectrum to internally pressure their male colleagues; and third, they counted on support from their most prominent supporter at the time—the president herself.

Women in congress, the parties, think tanks, academia, and civil society mobilized and worked cooperatively. Like their counterparts elsewhere in Latin America, they used traditional and social media, as well as their personal connections to elected officials, to keep the issue visible and to make their arguments heard. As one academic noted, "The Chilean women's movement always had the gender quota very much on their mind… There always has been an important movement of women demanding quotas" (Interview 13). An activist stated, "civil society pressure was really strong, with activists tweeting at the press, very alert to the debates that were happening in congress" (Interview 32). Activism both inside and outside congress was key: women flooded the halls and galleries during important committee meetings and during votes, making it impossible for legislators to quietly kill the quota in committee, as they had before (Arce Riffo, 2018: 24).

Complementing organizing outside congress was women legislators' strategic actions inside congress. In particular, NM women wanted to display a united front. They formed a *bancada* (caucus) and used in-person meetings and WhatsApp groups to coordinate actions and develop arguments that would persuade other legislators to support the quota (Interview 35). They initially targeted women legislators who had expressed hesitancy or opposition. When approaching other women, they highlighted men elites' continued resistance and played on women's sense of gender solidarity (Interviews 22, 23). As one interviewee explained, "In the debate, the actions of the women legislators began to take on an important role, as people realized that the men didn't want the women incorporated into the electoral reform, and women realized that, in order to maintain space in parliament for women, they would need a quota" (Interview 13).

The *bancada* especially helped convert conservative women into advocates. Chile's right-wing parties historically rejected claims that broader electoral reforms were needed to address democratic deficits. They also spurned quotas. By 2015 however, some conservative women were willing to break with their male party colleagues. A *bancada* participant explained, "The women on the right had always said that women had to get here on their own merit, and not because of a quota. But then I said to them, 'Listen, we all have the merit, what happens is not getting the opportunities'" (Interview 37).

Like women candidates in left parties, those in right parties often found themselves relegated to losing districts or unfavorable list positions. For example, a right-wing woman noted that despite successfully establishing herself in a traditionally conservative district, intraparty negotiations gave the top list position to a man (Interview 17). Another reflected, "In the beginning I was against quotas, but I began to realize they were necessary. Yes, I had done it on my own but so many would not…. My decision to support quotas would not be based on my own experiences" (Interview 39). As conservative women reckoned with men elites' stranglehold over candidate selection, they rejected opponents' arguments that quotas sacrifice merit. As one interviewee noted, "A

moment arrived when they [some women on the right] realized that, if they didn't accept the quota law, they would be left with no women" (Interview 36). Essentially, conservative women realized that quotas would help them preserve their own spaces.

Right-wing women's addition to the *bancada* meant that, compared to previous stalled efforts, "There was transversal support from women of all the parties" (Interview 13; see also Figueroa Rubio, 2021). Lily Pérez, a well-known right-wing senator who previously opposed quotas, reversed positions and her addition increased advocates' influence. Support from right-wing women mattered enormously as the electoral reform moved through congress: with so many committees charged with evaluating the bill, advocates needed to keep pressure on legislators to not strike the quota. One right-wing party elite explained, "All the women legislators would show up to the committee meeting, we would be stacked in behind each other…. This generated pressure… They [committee members] would then have to vote in favor because they were left with no other option" (Interview 23).

Success at Last. At key moments, advocates relied on their most powerful member: Bachelet. The president spent valuable political capital on the quota, reminding coalition legislators of her preferences and even pressuring reluctant men from the NM (Interviews 9, 22). Bachelet let NM members know that questioning the quota's inclusion in the reform package amounted to questioning her leadership. Bachelet's commitment meant the men members of her coalition were "obligated to support" quotas to remain in Bachelet's favor (Interview 22). "The quota would have been dropped in the negotiation were it not for Bachelet," one interviewee reflected (Interview 13). Likewise, a man NM leader explained that Bachelet did not want to lose the quota a second time and she "put her total weight behind this." He continued, "Without the pressure from Bachelet, [the quota] would have stopped at 30 percent… 40 percent was a leap for the parties" (Interview 9).

Bachelet's support likely stemmed from her own commitments (Reyes-Housholder 2018, 2019). In her second term, she continued appointing high-profile feminists to her team and supporting policies that advanced women's rights across sectors (Thomas, 2011, 2019). This time, the momentum for electoral reform opened a window of opportunity to revise the binomial system—and adopt the gender quota alongside it. With women advocates mobilizing in civil society and through the *bancada*, and with Bachelet amplifying their demands among the political leadership, opponents found themselves constrained. An interviewee explained, "Politically it became incorrect to speak against the gender quota…. No one could say 'we don't want women' or 'women aren't prepared'" (Interview 13). Another concurred: "There is resistance from all the men but they have to just go along with it, it is more politically correct to say they support women" (Interview 23). No legislators who opposed quotas, for instance, took to the press or social media in the same way proponents did. By publicly embarrassing those who resisted quotas, advocates imposed social and therefore electoral costs on NM members (Interview 22), echoing the naming-and-shaming strategies used elsewhere in Latin America (Baldez, 2004, Piscopo and Vázquez Correa, 2023).

Linking the quota's fate to the binomial reform also diminished men party elites' opposition, as the quota became but one small part of a wholly altered system. As one feminist legislator explained, "The previous attempts failed because they had always presented the quota law on its own, without any link to a larger reform, and this made the situation enormously more difficult." She added bluntly, "If the quota law had been proposed separately, it wouldn't stand a chance of being passed" (Interview 37). A right-wing woman legislator concurred, "The quota could never have passed with the binomial in place—the whole electoral system needed to change" (Interview 39). In her view, the broader electoral reform enlarged the pie by raising district magnitude, which made a 40-percent quota more palatable to men, "since really they just care about whether or not they can still win their seats" (Interview 39). Men elites' incentives to support quota adoption, then, responded to the combination of two factors: pressure by advocates, including Bachelet, to appear supportive of gender equality alongside the possibility that a quota nested within a larger reform would mean sacrificing fewer electoral opportunities than a quota by itself.

Ultimately, the window of opportunity presented by replacing the electoral system allowed quota advocates to succeed. The pressure applied by feminist activists, women legislators united in a cross-party coalition, and the president herself ensured the quota's inclusion in the electoral reforms. The package included three laws passed between 2015 and 2016, which together (1) replaced the binomial system with an open-list proportional representation system with larger district magnitudes, and (2) established sweeping changes to parties' internal organizations and campaign finance schemes. These were clearly democratizing reforms aimed at reinvigorating representative democracy and restoring legitimacy to parties and political institutions. The title of the law replacing the electoral system included the phrase "strengthening representativity in the national congress" (Law 208400, passed April 27, 2015). The other two titles mentioned "strengthening and transparency of democracy" and "strengthening the public and democratic character of the political parties" (Laws 20900 and 20915, respectively, both passed on April 11, 2016). Chile did in one package what many Latin American countries did serially, but the process reflects the twinning of electoral reforms and gender quotas seen elsewhere. In the Chilean case, the 40-percent quota applied to candidate lists as well as parties' governing boards; included a penalty for parties' noncompliance; offered parties a bonus for every woman elected (to encourage women's placement in winning districts); and required parties to spend 10 percent of their state funding on leadership training for women.

Gender Parity and the 2020–2023 Constitutional Process

The 40-percent quota first applied in 2017. Women won 22.6% of seats in the lower house (35 of 155 seats) and 23.3% of the senate (10 of 43 seats). These results constituted a notable jump from the pre-quota era, but fell far short of the quota threshold. Since the 40-percent quota applied at the national and not the district level, parties largely nominated women candidates in districts where the party performed least-well in the previous election (Le Foulon and Suárez Cao, 2018: 105). Low numbers of women candidates in

competitive or winning districts, especially when combined with open lists, diminished women's victories. This minimal compliance echoed other Latin American countries' experiences. In these cases, women advocates responded by introducing measures to strengthen quotas. Advocates sought higher quota thresholds and mandates for parties to place women in certain districts or list positions (Hinojosa and Piscopo, 2013; Piscopo and Vázquez Correa, 2023), winning these reforms thanks to the routine windows of opportunity opened by serial replacement. Similarly, the launch of Chile's constitutional process would hand quota advocates an opportunity to improve upon the 40-percent quota.

The Constitutional Process as a Democratizing Reform. The 2015–2016 electoral reforms aimed to create a more representative system, one that would elect a congress better reflective of voters' preferences and thus able to initiate the social and economic reforms sought by protestors (Interview 9). Yet the 2017 elections yielded a divided government: no party or coalition won a congressional majority, and right-wing Sebastián Piñera returned to the presidency.

When Piñera's government raised public transportation fees in October 2019, social unrest exploded. The 2019 *estallido*—or awakening—eclipsed previous protests in scale and scope: women, indigenous peoples, students, workers, pensioners, and significant proportions of the middle class mobilized across Chile, paralyzing all major regions (Arce Riffo, 2021; Piscopo and Siavelis, 2021; Reyes-Housholder et al., 2023; Thomas and Glaser, 2022). Protestors expressed wide-ranging policy demands: lower utility costs, higher pensions, access to clean water, fair housing, improved healthcare, more upward mobility, better public education, greater justice for Indigenous peoples, and an end to corruption, police violence, and violence against women (Reyes-Housholder et al., 2023). Yet they collectively traced Chile's ills to one source—the 1980 Constitution (Figueroa Rubio, 2021)—and coalesced on a single demand: write a new charter.

As an interviewee reflected, "constitutional reform was necessary" (Interview 13). Protestors and elites on the left and center-left contended that democracy would remain elusive so long as the dictatorship-era constitution remained, as even major revisions—like the 2015–2016 electoral reforms—had not succeeded in electing politicians poised to implement the economic and social reforms most voters sought. Finally, on November 15, 2019, leaders from all major parties agreed to a constitutional process. The process began with a referendum in October 2020, in which nearly 80 percent of voters selected a popularly elected constitutional assembly to write a new constitution (Piscopo and Siavelis, 2021). Chile thus embarked upon another major effort to redesign national political institutions in order to improve how democracy works.

A Window of Opportunity for Gender Parity. The constitutional process, as a democratizing reform, offered quota advocates a window of opportunity to improve upon the gender quota. Women's mobilization had played a leading role in the *estallido*. The collective Las Tesis wrote and first performed the protest song, "The Rapist is You," and the song

rapidly became the *estallido's* feminist anthem, performed routinely as marches continued over November and December 2019. Lyrics connect gender-based violence to women's political exclusion, question the state's legitimacy ("the oppressor state is a male rapist"), and trace women's mistreatment to their second-class status ("patriarchy is a judge / that judges us for being born") (Arce Riffo, 2022: 58). Women protestors also drew connections to other feminist causes, wearing the green bandannas associated with Latin America's legal abortion movement, for instance. "The revolution will be feminist—or it won't be a revolution" was painted onto buildings and chanted by marchers (McGowan, 2021).

Feminists' mobilization in the streets, while focused on abortion and gender-based violence, also fueled demand for political power (Arce Riffo, 2021, Riquelme Parra, 2021). Like earlier generations of women who participated in Latin America's democratic transitions, women participating in Chile's uprising understood the importance of advocating from inside the state. As one interviewee explained, women were mindful that the 40-percent quota had resulted in just 22% women elected. She continued, "The [November 2019] agreement would use the existing open-list proportional representation system to elect the assembly. We knew from the 2017 elections that there's no way this quota would result in women having equal voice in the convention" (Interview 38). Advocates contended that, with just a 40-percent gender quota, the convention would become a "congress 2.0"—a deliberative body with neither confidence nor legitimacy (Suárez Cao, 2021). The electoral rules would therefore require an adjustment in order to elect more women, which in turn would ensure a more inclusive, representative, and democratic convention (Arce Riffo, 2022).

Once again, feminists argued that women's presence would address democratic deficits, improving both the process and outcome of democratic representation. "Parity would dress the process with democratic legitimacy" explained one feminist (Interview 7). Quota advocates again activated their networks. Their members did not include a woman president this time around, but they did include prominent voices within civil society and the women's movement. Women academics—convened as the Red de Politólogas (Network of Women Political Scientists)—collaborated with women deputies to design, present, and lobby for a revision to the special election law that would choose the constitutional assembly delegates (Suárez Cao, 2022). The proposal improved upon the 40-percent quota by requiring parity among candidates and winners, with gender balance at the district level and women candidates in the first position on all electoral lists.

To secure the proposal's passage, advocates relied upon the same strategies as before: they manifested popular and cross-party support to keep pressure on congress; mobilized the women's movement*;* and made normative arguments. The measure enjoyed "transversal" support, meaning support from women legislators on the left and right (Figueroa Rubio, 2021; Suárez Cao, 2021). Demonstrating in the hallways outside congress while deliberations on the special election law unfolded, women legislators chanted "We are / we are / more than half / in the convention / we want parity" (Cicardini, 2019). Some elites even snuck activists into committees' closed-door deliberations, bringing the demonstrations into the salons (McGowan, 2021). Both inside and outside congress, parity advocates reminded legislators about women's presence in the *estallido* (Arce

Riffo, 2021; Riquelme Parra, 2021). For instance, lawmakers, activists, and members of the Red de Politólogas rallied behind banners that read "without women, there is no constitution" and "never again without us" (using *nosotras,* the feminine ending of "us" in Spanish). Testifying before congress, one feminist movement leader explained that "gender parity is not against democracy—it is the tool for realizing it" (Sánchez Lobos and Figueroa Rubio, 2022: 235). As before, these strategies applied public pressure on men elites, as those looking to strike the parity provision would appear against women and thus against democracy.

Congress ultimately agreed to gender parity among both candidates and winners for the constitutional assembly. The latter would be ensured via a "best loser" system: after tallying the preference votes at the district level, any gender imbalance in results would be rectified by bumping the worst-winning candidate of the overrepresented sex for the best-losing candidate of the underrepresented sex. *Opponents initially claimed that* the best-loser system was undemocratic, but quota advocates argued that open-list systems already distort voter preferences by using all co-partisans' personal votes—including those received by the worst performers—to determine parties' seat allocation (Suárez Cao, 2022). With high-profile spokeswomen from the parties and the Red de Politólogas appearing in the media to defend the link between gender parity and democratic outcomes, unsupportive men party members felt compelled to vote "yes" (Suárez Cao, 2022).

Chile's constitutional process then underwent several turns. The gender-parity convention, elected in May 2021 and seated from July 2021 to July 2022, produced a draft constitution that voters rejected in a September 2022 referendum, sending elites back to the drawing board. They designed a new process for convening a second constitution-writing body, this time combining popularly elected delegates with experts selected by congress but preserving gender parity among both the experts and the delegates.

Exploring why Chile has struggled to write a new constitution lies beyond this paper's scope. Our point is that adopting parity for the constitutional bodies illustrates our argument: efforts to address democratic deficits—specifically those related to perceived failures of political representation—create windows of opportunity to adopt gender quotas or gender parity. Chile's constitutional process constitutes a major undertaking to improve democracy.Quota advocates then took advantage of this reform moment, combining normative arguments about the link between women's presence and democracy, on the one hand, with social and thus electoral pressure on men legislators, on the other hand. Women's advocacy mattered enormously. As feminist leader—and later constitutional delegate to the first convention—Bárbara Sepúlveda commented, "The feminist movement has achieved very concrete changes—like achieving parity in the new constitution. It's historic, that has never happened before in the world" (McGowan, 2021).

Conclusion

Scholarship on quota adoption has stressed the role of democratic transitions. Regime change opens windows of opportunity: elites are already redesigning national political institutions, allowing quota advocates to connect women's representation to improved

democratic outcomes (Bauer, 2008; Htun and Jones, 2002; Fallon et al., 2012; Palma and Cerva, 2014; Waylen, 2010, 2015). Yet Chile adopted its gender quota 25 years after the democratic transition: what explains this seemingly divergent outcome?

To answer this question, we placed elite interviews in dialogue with different literatures, including scholarship on quota adoption and national-level electoral reforms. This analysis generated the following insights: (1) when elites redesign national political institutions outside of regime transitions, they do so because they are pressed to address crises of political representation and improve democratic performance; (2) these democratizing reforms create windows of opportunity for quota advocates; and (3) with reforms to fix political representation on the table, quota advocates can leverage arguments linking women's inclusion to improved democracy, thus pressuring elites into adopting quotas. Chile's adoption of the 40-percent quota as part of the 2015–2016 electoral system overhaul, and its adoption of gender parity for the 2020–2023 constitutional process, illustrates how democratizing reforms and women's advocacy combine to produce quota adoption.

By emphasizing the critical roles of both democratizing reforms and women's advocacy, our argument has important implications for comparative politics scholars and for potential real-world instances of electoral reform. First, our analysis suggests that quota adoption in emerging and established democracies follows similar dynamics, in that democratizing efforts can open windows of opportunity for quota adoption absent regime transitions. Relatedly, our analysis underscores the central role of women's advocacy, a factor critical for progress on women's rights (Zaremberg and Rezende de Almeida 2022) but one often muted in recent scholarship focusing on elite men's incentives to adopt quotas (Valdini, 2019; Weeks, 2018). Interviewees were unanimous in discussing how, even when institutional reform finally became possible, quotas (or parity) did not automatically follow. Women in congress, in parties, and in civil society still needed to mobilize and apply electoral pressure on their resistant male colleagues. Our emphasis on women's advocacy echoes the conclusion reached by Celis et al. (2011) about quota adoption in Europe: women are principal actors in electoral reform. Likewise, as Sánchez Lobos and Figueroa Rubio recognize, neither the state nor the parties ever lead on women's rights, and so "women lobbying in the public sphere have been architects of their own political and social destiny" Sánchez Lobos and Figueroa Rubio (2022, 229).

Second, our analysis offers insight into why quota bills have failed to advance in other countries, such as Canada and Guatemala. We contend that Chile fits a regional and even global pattern wherein embedding gender quotas and parity within larger reforms proves more common than passing stand-alone laws. Our analysis is not deterministic, but it does suggest that non-adoption remains the equilibrium until elites agree to undertake a national-level institutional redesign. This proposition lays the groundwork for future research, which could further explore and test the relationship between electoral reform and quota adoption.

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ORCID iDs

Jennifer M. Piscopo https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9043-1810
Gwynn Thomas https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6179-8464
Peter Siavelis https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6198-8206

Notes

1. Occidental College provided ethics approval with file #Pisc-F17022 and Arizona State University provided ethics approval with STUDY00006272. Respondents participating in 2022's follow-up interviews were designated by their original number and not double-counted.
2. Chile also eliminated compulsory voting, which, while consequential, does not redesign national political institutions.

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Author Biographies

Jennifer M. Piscopo is Professor of Politics and Gender at Royal Holloway University of London. Previously, she was Associate Professor and Chair of Politics at Occidental College. Her work on gender, elections, gender quotas, and women's political representation has appeared in over 30 academic journals, including *The American Political Science Review, The American Journal of Political Science, Politics & Gender,* and *Comparative Political Studies.* With Mona Lena Krook and Susan Franceschet, she co-edited *The Impact of Gender Quotas* (Oxford University Press 2012).

Email: Jennifer.Piscopo@rhul.ac.uk.

Gwynn Thomas is an Associate Professor and Chair of Global Gender and Sexuality Studies at the University at Buffalo, SUNY. Her work has focused on the gendered constructions of political legitimacy, women's and feminist movements, women's political leadership, and feminist institutionalism within Latin America. She is the author of *Contesting Legitimacy in Chile: Familial Ideals, Citizenship, and Political Struggle, 1970–1990* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011). Her work has also appeared in *Comparative Politics, Comparative Political Studies, International Journal of Feminist Politics, Journal of Women, Politics and Policy, Journal of Latin American Studies,* and *Politics & Gender,* among others.

Email: gmthomas@buffalo.edu

Peter M. Siavelis is a Professor in the Department of Politics and International Affairs at Wake Forest University. He has published on many aspects of Latin American and Chilean politics including candidate selection, election systems, presidencies, gender quotas, and informal

institutions. His most recent edited book is *Democratic Chile: The Politics and Policies of a Historic Coalition* (with Kirsten Sehnbruch) and he has published in journals including *Comparative Politics, Comparative Political Studies, Electoral Studies, Presidential Studies Quarterly,* and *Latin American Research Review*.

Email: siavelpm@wfu.edu

Magda Hinojosa is Dean of Social Sciences and Professor in the School of Politics and Global Studies at Arizona State University. Her work examines women's political incorporation in Latin America, including the role of candidate selection procedures in explaining women's under-representation in formal positions of power and the effects of women's political representation. Hinojosa is the author of *Selecting Women, Electing Women: Political Representation and Candidate Selection in Latin America* (Temple University Press, 2012) and co-author of *Seeing Women, Strengthening Democracy: How Women in Politics Foster Connected Citizens* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

Email: Magda.Hinojosa@asu.edu