

Levers for Reaching Gender Parity: Design Options for Canada

by Jennifer M. Piscopo, PhD
Professor of Gender and Politics
Director of the Gender Institute
Royal Holloway, University of London
Jennifer.Piscopo@rhul.ac.uk

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What is gender parity and how do countries get there?

Gender parity exists when positions of decision-making power are occupied by equal numbers of men and women. In a parliament, that would mean women and men MPs each occupy 50 percent of the seats. Research consistently shows that voters perceive political decision-making bodies with gender parity as more democratic, more legitimate, and fairer. Voters also view these political decision-making bodies as making better decisions for citizens as a whole, when compared to an all-male body.¹

For decades, observers and scholars alike put their hopes in “pipeline theory”: the idea that women remained underrepresented in politics because they simply had not yet caught up to men in terms of education and experience. The theory assumed that as more women gained education and experience in politics-adjacent fields, like law and business, their numbers in politics would rise naturally.

Yet time gradually disproved pipeline theory. Canadian women began outnumbering Canadian men as graduates of law schools as early as the mid-1990s, and currently outnumber men as both law and business graduates.² However, their numbers in parliament have not increased in comparable fashion.

¹ Clayton, Amanda, Diana Z. O’Brien, and Jennifer M. Piscopo. 2019. “All Male Panels? Representation and Democratic Legitimacy.” *American Journal of Political Science* 63 (1): 113-129; Clayton, Amanda, Diana Z. O’Brien, and Jennifer M. Piscopo. 2025. “Electoral Gender Quotas and Democratic Legitimacy.” *American Political Science Review*. Published online: doi:10.1017/S0003055425000176.

² For historical data on women law graduates, see trends reported by the University of British Columbia: https://historyproject.allard.ubc.ca/sites/default/files/milestone/gender_gap_milestone.pdf. For contemporary data on women’s proportion as law and business graduates (masters or higher), see data from Statistics Canada: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tb11/en/tv.action?pid=3710013502&pickMembers%5B0%5D=2.6&pickMembers%5B1%5D=4.1&cubeTimeFrame.startYear=2022&cubeTimeFrame.endYear=2022&referencePeriods=20220101%2C20220101>.

In the April 2025 general election, women won just 30% of seats in Canada's House of Commons, the same proportion they held after the 2021 general elections.³ Women's preparation and qualifications for elected office increased, but even as they gained the requisite credentials, the barriers they faced trying to enter the "old boys clubs" of political parties did not disappear. Discrediting pipeline theory reveals the role played by persistent gender discrimination.

The fast track to electing more women in Canada

Countries currently electing more than 40 percent women to parliament do not depend on the now-discredited pipeline theory to approach or reach gender parity. Most employ some form of *statutory gender quota*. These laws, often inscribed in countries' constitutions, take two principal forms:

1. *Candidate gender quotas* require that political parties run certain percentages of women candidates.
2. *Reserved seats* set aside a certain number of seats in the legislature specifically for women.

More than 100 countries in the world have statutory gender quotas, measures that set aside certain proportions of parliamentary candidacies or parliamentary seats for women. In 2025, *not* having gender quotas marks a country as more outside the global norm than having one.

Some might say that statutory gender quotas cannot work in countries like Canada, which elect members of parliament in single-member districts (ridings). In fact, however, statutory gender quotas mandating a minimum percentage of women candidates already exist in single-member district systems, including in two significant democracies, Mexico and France. Both countries set their quota thresholds at 50 percent—at gender parity—reflecting the increasingly common trend of using quotas to achieve gender balance in parliament. Countries that do not pursue gender parity, and instead set gender quotas at thresholds below 50 percent, have less effective gender quotas.

Some might also say that gender quotas violate the principle of merit in candidate selection and unfairly violate parties' autonomy over whom to nominate. However, there is no evidence for the first claim and a democratic objection to the second. Relative to the supposition that gender quotas lead parties to prioritize gender over merit, studies from across the globe have found no difference in the backgrounds, qualifications, experience, and behavior of women and men elected under statutory gender quotas.⁴ In fact, one well-known study from Sweden found that gender quotas *raise* the merit of women and men candidates, as heightened competition from

³ Current figures for women in parliament are taken from the Inter-Parliamentary Union's world rankings on the proportion of women in parliament. The ranking is available at: https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking/?date_month=10&date_year=2025.

⁴ Franceschet, Susan and Jennifer M. Piscopo. 2014. "Sustaining Gendered Practices: Power, Parties, and Elite Political Networks in Argentina." *Comparative Political Studies* 47 (1): 85-110; Murray, Rainbow. 2010. "Second Among Unequals? A Study of Whether France's "Quota Women" are Up to the Job." *Politics & Gender* 6 (4): 643-669; O'Brien, Diana Z. 2012. "Quotas and Qualifications in Uganda." In *The Impact of Gender Quotas*, Susan Franceschet, Mona Lena Krook, and Jennifer M. Piscopo (eds). New York: Oxford University Press, 57-71.

women effectively weeds out the “mediocre men.”⁵ And relative to the supposition that parties have complete autonomy over whom to nominate, quota-adopting countries argue that parties which fail to nominate women are failing to practice democracy.⁶ Political parties are not private organizations, but vehicles for democratic representation—and so they can be subject to regulations about their nomination practices.

This report reviews the design options that Canada could adopt. Ultimately, the optimal design—as found in Mexico—is straightforward: a candidate gender quota set at gender parity, which requires that parties nominate equal numbers of men and women across all ridings in which they field candidates, with enforcement mechanisms that stipulate penalties for non-compliance. It can be done, and models from other countries show how.

Can gender parity be achieved without quotas?

Some countries have achieved large proportions of women MPs without statutory gender quotas, usually because individual political parties have *internal party quotas*. Take Australia: the Labor party mandates that each sex shall hold at least 40 percent of the candidacies for federal elections.⁷ Since Labor also won the 2025 elections, their party quota combined with their landslide victory meant Australia achieved a near-parity parliament: women hold 46% of lower house seats. Yet had Labor not won nearly two-thirds of the lower-house seats, fewer women would have been elected, as none of the other major parties have internal party quotas.

Relying on parties’ goodwill alone reveals two key facts. First, even when countries do not have statutory quotas, they still have some initiatives—even if at the party level—to boost the number of women candidates. The number of women candidates is not rising on its own. Second, relying on parties’ goodwill makes women’s share of parliamentary seats depend on which parties win majorities. Since left parties are more likely to have internal party quotas, women will hold many seats in parliament when left parties win, but few seats in parliaments when they do not.

Rather than rely on parties’ goodwill, most countries now adopt statutory gender quotas, in the form of either candidate gender quotas or reserved seats.⁸ These countries include Canada’s third-largest trading partner, Mexico, and its European democratic peers, like France, Spain and Belgium.

The predominant trend is to set the quota to gender parity, meaning either 50%; a minimum of 40% women; or no more than 40% of either sex.

⁵ Besley, Timothy, Olle Folke, Torsten Persson, and Johanna Rickne. 2017. “Gender Quotas and the Crisis of the Mediocre Man: Theory and Evidence from Sweden.” *American Economic Review* 107 (8): 2204-2242.

⁶ Piscopo, Jennifer M. 2015. “States as Gender Equality Activists: The Evolution of Quota Laws in Latin America.” *Latin American Politics and Society* 57 (3): 27-49.

⁷ Details on all countries’ and parties’ policies are drawn from the IDEA Gender Quotas database, cross-referenced with academic scholarship. The IDEA Gender Quotas database is available at: <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas-database/>.

⁸ Hughes, Melanie M., Pamela Paxton, Amanda Clayton, and Pär Zetterberg. 2019. ‘Global gender quota adoption, implementation, and reform’. *Comparative Politics* 51 (2): 219-238.

In 2024, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, which houses the treaty monitoring body for the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), approved General Recommendation 40. This CEDAW recommendation endorses gender parity in decision-making bodies as a “core principle” of human rights and governance.⁹

In summary:

1. The number of women in parliament does not increase naturally and does not respond to women’s progress in fields like law and business;
2. The number of women in parliament only increases when parties or countries adopt rules about women’s nomination or election, called *gender quotas*;
3. *Internal party quotas* cannot reliably raise the number of women MPs because they do not apply to all parties; only *statutory gender quotas* apply to all political parties.¹⁰

What levers make statutory gender quotas work?

Effective statutory gender quotas follow international best practices, meaning they bring the final composition of the national parliament close to gender parity, such that women hold between 40 and 50 percent of the seats. Effective gender quotas consist of two elements (as seen in Figure 1):

1. A technical design that sets a clear threshold and matches the country’s electoral system
2. Enforcement mechanisms to ensure each party’s compliance

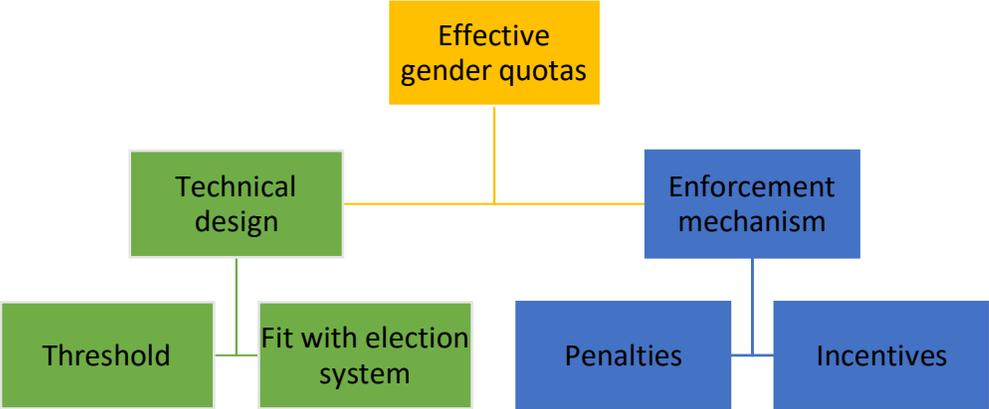


Figure 1. Design elements for gender quotas

⁹ United Nations Office of the High Commission for Human Rights. 2024. CEDAW General Recommendation 40. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/general-recommendation-no-40-equal-and-inclusive>.

¹⁰ In Canada, in provinces where the NDP performs well, women are better represented, as the NDP explicitly aims to recruit women.

Technical design

Thresholds: Statutory gender quotas set a threshold percentage of candidates or seats that women must receive. When set at gender parity, the threshold is 50% or 40%, where 40% is a minimum and constitutes a floor rather than a ceiling. When set below 50%, the statutes themselves are often cast in gender-neutral terms, meaning they typically refer to “one sex” having “at least” the desired percentage. Since women are universally the historically underrepresented sex, gender-neutral language does not obscure how, in practical terms, the threshold percentage refers to women rather than men.

To be effective, thresholds need to be expressed as mandates rather than suggestions, meaning the statute says the threshold “must” be reached rather than it “ought” to be reached.

Election systems: Countries use different election systems for their national parliaments. In the case of candidate gender quotas, the statute must be written to translate the required number of women candidates into a significant number of women elected. Take countries that have multi-member districts, which allow parties to present multiple candidates in a district. Parties present these candidates on rank-order list. The party then wins a certain number of seats in that district, and the parties’ candidates receive the seats based on their rank-order. So in Belgium, the gender quota law states that the top two candidates on each list cannot be of the same sex. This *placement mandate* ensures that, if the party wins at least two seats, it will elect one man and one woman. This placement mandate prevents parties from placing women in unwinnable positions.

A common myth is that candidate gender quotas can only work when countries use multi-member districts, because only multi-member districts allow parties to divide candidacies between men and women. This is not true. **As described below, countries that use single-member districts to elect their national parliaments—including Mexico, France and South Korea—have candidate gender quotas.** These countries provide lessons for how Canada could design an effective gender quota.

Enforcement mechanisms

Quotas must not only be well-designed, the statute must include *enforcement mechanisms* so that parties actually comply with the rules. Enforcement mechanisms take two forms: (1) penalties and (2) incentives. An incentive is a bonus (like additional state funding) that a party may obtain but does not *have to* obtain, whereas a penalty is a cost that a party would not otherwise pay. Penalties are considered more effective than incentives.

However, the statute must impose costs that are severe enough such that parties will want to avoid them. If parties are willing to pay the costs, then they will not comply with the statute. For example, preventing non-compliant parties from competing in the election is a high cost, while fining non-compliant parties is less high. In France, for example, some parties see the imposed fines as modest enough that they are willing to pay them, and so they do not comply.

Statutory gender quotas: design options for single-member district electoral systems

In an electoral system using single-member districts, parties may field only one candidate in a district and the district can only have one victor. The candidate with the most votes wins, explaining why single-member district systems are also called “first past the post” (FTFP). Since the total number of candidates fielded per party per district cannot be divided, and the number of victors per district cannot be divided, gender quotas cannot apply *within the district* (as they can in multi-member districts).

There are instead two options for getting to the threshold, depending on whether the gender quota is a *candidate gender quota*, operating at the level of candidates, or a *reserved seat system*, shaping the final composition of parliament.

- In the case of a candidate gender quota, the total number of women candidates nominated by the party must cross the threshold.
- In the case of reserved seats, the total number of seats that women win must cross the threshold. To achieve this goal, usually special election districts are designated or created and only women candidates are allowed to compete. An all-women competition means only women will win. The number of reserved districts relative to the total number of districts constitutes the quota threshold.

Reserved seat systems may initially appear desirable because, unlike candidate gender quotas, they act directly on women’s final seat-share. However, countries currently using reserved seats set the thresholds lower than gender parity: usually, countries reserve just 25% of districts for all-women competitions. Consequently, reserved seats are viewed as less effective: notwithstanding their ability to guarantee some total percentage of women MPs, they fall short of parity. They also have undemocratic dimensions. First, they make women’s electoral competition something apart from the “regular” competition unfolding in the “regular” constituencies. Second, they ghettoize women politicians and make parties unwilling to also run women in the non-reserved seats (called “open seats”).

Consequently, candidate gender quotas are viewed as more effective in single-member district systems because they can (1) be set at gender parity and (2) do not isolate or ghettoize women candidates into special districts.

Effective: candidate gender quotas in single-member district systems

Five countries currently elect their national parliaments using single-member districts with FTFP rules and apply gender quotas to do so. This number is small not because statutory gender quotas cannot work in single-member district systems, but because single-member district election systems are less common.

The five countries are Mexico, France, South Korea, Uzbekistan and Nepal (see Table 1).¹¹ France and Uzbekistan elect their entire national assemblies using single-member districts, whereas Mexico, South Korea, and Nepal have mixed electoral systems, meaning they combine single-member districts elected via FTFP with multi-member districts elected via some form of proportional representation.

In Nepal and South Korea, the candidate gender quota is not effective. The statutes set the threshold well below parity, at 33% in Nepal and 30% in South Korea. In Nepal, the gender quota is not stipulated as separately applying to the single-member districts and the multi-member districts. As a result, parties can fill the quota by concentrating women's nominations in the multi-member districts. Moreover, the law contains no enforcement mechanism. In South Korea, the statute says that parties should *endeavor to* (rather than *must*) nominate 30% women across all single-member districts.¹² Second, the law contains a comparably weak enforcement mechanism, stipulating that parties failing to meet this 30% target will receive fewer public funds (discussed more below).

In Uzbekistan, the candidate gender quota is also not effective.¹³ Although the threshold is 40%, there are no enforcement mechanisms to ensure that parties comply.

France presents a better quota design. France elects its national assembly exclusively using single-member districts and the statute offers a clear mandate with a threshold set at parity: parties must field equal numbers of men and women. Still, the law remains silent on the distribution of women candidates, allowing parties to cluster women candidates in districts they expect to lose—which is precisely what they do.¹⁴ A further obstacle is the weak enforcement mechanism. As noted above, non-compliant parties in France are fined, and many prefer to pay fines rather than achieve gender parity.¹⁵ The larger parties especially opt for fines, as they can absorb the cost more easily than the smaller parties. In fact, the predecessor party to Les Républicains paid 6 million euro in fines between 2007 and 2012.¹⁶

¹¹ Nepal's September 2025 political crisis might generate future changes to the election system. Prior to 2024, Mongolia also elected its national parliament using exclusively single-member districts, applying a then 20-percent candidate gender quota to parties' nominations across all districts. In 2024, however, Mongolia changed its election system and no longer uses single-member districts elected via first past the post.

¹² Whereas South Korea applies gender parity to the proportional representation tier and uses language that makes gender parity obligatory, there are still no enforcement mechanisms.

¹³ Uzbekistan also tightly controls political competition, reducing the democratic character of elections.

¹⁴ Achin, Catherine, Sandrine Léveque, Anja Durovic, Eléonore Lépinard, and Amy G. Mazur. 2020. "Parity Sanctions and Campaign Financing in France: Increased Numbers, Little Concrete Gender Transformation." In *Gendered Electoral Financing*, Ragnhild L. Muriaas, Vibeke Wang, and Rainbow Murray (eds). New York: Routledge, 27-54.

¹⁵ Murray, Rainbow. 2007. "How Parties Evaluate Compulsory Quotas: A Study of the Implementation of the 'Parity' Law in France." *Parliamentary Affairs* 60 (4): 568-584; Murray, Rainbow. 2012. "Parity and Legislative Competence in France." In *The Impact of Gender Quotas*, Susan Franceschet, Mona Lena Krook, and Jennifer M. Piscopo (eds). New York: Oxford University Press, 27-42.

¹⁶ Achin et al 2020, p. 35.

Mexico offers the most effective quota design. Although Mexico uses a mixed electoral system, unlike Nepal, Mexico requires that the candidate gender quota be respected in both the single-member district tier and the multi-member district tier. Since 2014, the threshold is set at gender parity, via a constitutional reform. The enforcement mechanism is that non-compliant parties are given 48 hours to revise their candidate registries. If they fail to do so, they cannot enter the race.

Mexico's National Electoral Institute would interpret this penalty as follows: parties would be unable to compete in the number of districts equal to the number of districts in which they are short women candidates. For instance, if a party is fielding candidates in all 300 single-member districts, they must nominate 150 men and 150 women; if they nominated 145 women, and refused to adjust, they would lose the ability to compete in 5 districts. Since it would be impossible to know in which 5 districts the party would have fielded women candidates, the National Electoral Institute would use a lottery to randomly select the 5 districts from which the party would be barred from competing.¹⁷ In practice, this penalty has never come to pass: aware of the sanction, parties comply in advance.

Of further interest to Canada is how Mexico explicitly addresses the placement of women candidates across winning and losing districts. The 2014 electoral reform states that, in the single-member districts, "none of the genders may be assigned *exclusively* to those districts where the party received the lowest percentage of votes in the previous election."¹⁸ Since 2015, when reviewing and approving candidate registries, Mexico's National Electoral Institute has enforced this provision as follows:

1. For each party, districts are grouped into three categories based on the party's previous election results: winning, competitive, and losing.
2. Within each category, parties must practice gender parity. Said another way, they must distribute nominations between men and women equally in their winning districts, equally in their competitive districts, and equally in their losing districts.
3. New parties may distribute candidates as they please in the first election, but in subsequent elections, they will be held to this rule.

¹⁷ Personal interviews with authorities from Mexico's National Electoral Institute.

¹⁸ Congress of Mexico 2014, *Gaceta Parlamentaria*, Number 4021-IV, Article 232.

Table 1. Statutory Candidate Gender Quotas in Countries with Single-Member District Systems

Country	Election system	# of Single-Member Districts	Technical design: Threshold	Enforcement mechanism: Penalties	% women in lower or unicameral chamber (2025)	Quota result
Mexico	Mixed	300	Gender parity among all candidates nominated to the SMDs	Parties cannot compete	50.2%	Effective
France	SMD only	577	Gender parity among all candidates nominated to the SMDs	Fine	36.2%	Partially effective
South Korea	Mixed	253	Parties should <i>endeavor</i> to nominate 30% women in all SMDs	Reduced public subsidies to parties	20.3%	Ineffective
Uzbekistan	SMD only	150	40% women nominated to SMDs	None	38%	Ineffective
Nepal	Mixed	165	33% women nominated across total of parties' nominations to SMD and PR-tier combined	None	33.1%*	Ineffective

Note: Table arrays candidate gender quota from strongest to weakest, based on the combination of the technical design, the enforcement mechanism, and the proportion of women in the lower or unicameral chamber

*Prior to the dissolution of parliament following the September 2025 crisis

The contrasts between Nepal, South Korea, Uzbekistan, France, and Mexico identify the key features of an effective, statutory candidate gender quota for a single-member district system:

- Technical design
 - The statute must use language that obliges (e.g. “must”) rather than language that suggests (e.g. “endeavor”)
 - The threshold must be set at parity or at 40%, where 40% is described *as a minimum* for women or for either sex
 - The statute must include a rule that prevents parties from concentrating women candidates or candidates from the underrepresented sex in each party’s least competitive districts
- Enforcement mechanism
 - Preventing the party from entering the race generates compliance in a way that fines do not

Further approaches to implementing gender quotas in single-member districts

Only Mexico’s statutory gender quota for single-member districts specifies that parties must follow a specific distribution of women and men candidates across winning, competitive, and losing districts, respecting gender parity within each category. Mexican political parties retain autonomy over how to nominate women for each race, so long as the final count of women candidates across district categories matches the final count of male candidates. While the remaining countries with single-member districts and statutory candidate gender quotas do not contain this placement mandate, they similarly allow parties autonomy over candidate selection at the district level, so long as the total, final number of women candidates adds up.

The United Kingdom does not have statutory gender quotas, but also elects its parliament using single-member districts with winners chosen via FTFP rules. The UK Labour Party (the center-left party) devised a mechanism to ensure women’s nomination at the district level, one available to other parties required to fill gender quotas in similar electoral systems.

The mechanism is All-Women Shortlists (AWS) for nominations within specified districts, which Labour used for the 1997, 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2019 general elections. In 1997, Labour committed to using AWS for candidate selection in half of their “key” districts, defined as districts winnable on a 6-percent swing or where an incumbent Labour MP was retiring.¹⁹ Here, Labour created women-only competitions for the party nomination, so different party groups and factions could only put forward only women candidates. The AWS produced notable effects: following the 1997 elections, women achieved 18.2% of seats in the UK lower house.²⁰ In 2001, when AWS were not used, women’s proportion fell to 17.9%, resulting in frustration among

¹⁹ Childs, Sarah and Mona Lena Krook. 2012. “Labels and Mandates in the United Kingdom.” In *The Impact of Gender Quotas*, Susan Franceschet, Mona Lena Krook, and Jennifer M. Piscopo (eds). New York: Oxford University Press, 89-102; Kelly, Richard, and Isobel White. 2016. “All-Women Shortlists.” House of Commons Library, Briefing Paper 5057. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn05057/>.

²⁰ IPU 2020. “Women in parliament, 1945-2018.” Available at: <https://data.ipu.org/dataset/percentage-of-women-in-parliament-between-1945-2018/>.

Labour women.²¹ Labour re-adopted AWS in 2005, and by 2019, women comprised one-third of the House of Commons.

Ineffective: reserved seats in single-member district systems

Candidate gender quotas distribute women candidates across all the districts where the parties field candidates. They integrate women candidates into the regular electoral and democratic process. Reserved seats, by contrast, create special districts wherein only women compete. There are two primary ways reserved seats have been implemented, both of which set thresholds below gender parity.

Permanent special districts: Countries like Uganda and Kenya elect their parliaments using single-member districts with FTFP rules. Both countries have created separate women-only constituencies—special districts or “super districts”—which are also single-member districts chosen via FTFP rules. The seat from the super-district is reserved for women candidates, whereas the seat from the regular district is open to candidates of all genders. Voters effectively live in two districts: their residence corresponds to a regular district and to a super district. On election day, voters cast two votes: one vote for their preferred candidate running in the regular district, and one vote for their preferred woman candidate running in the special district.

Uganda illustrates the advantages and disadvantages of reserved seats. Uganda’s unicameral parliament has 555 seats. Of these, one-quarter are elected via special districts, for a threshold of 25%.²² On the one hand, this design seems effective because the number of Ugandan women MPs currently exceeds this threshold: there are 189 women MPs, a total of 34%, as women candidates also compete and win in the open seats.

On the other hand, this design poses serious democratic challenges.²³ First, it diminishes the value of women’s electoral victories. It cannot be compared to the all-women’s shortlists used in the UK Labour Party. The AWS created competition among Labour women for their party’s nomination, and the victorious Labour women then entered the general elections as Labour’s candidates. To win the actual seat, each Labour woman still needed to win the district, besting other men and women candidates. Uganda’s special districts, by contrast, create general election competitions among only women. In theory, the winning candidate still receives democratic legitimacy because she is directly elected, but in practice, the within-women competition becomes seen by voters as less serious and less democratically legitimate.

²¹ In the 1997 general elections, two men candidates prevented from standing in districts assigned to use AWS challenged the Labour Party’s policy in court, alleging discrimination under the 1975 Sex Equality Act. The court initially ruled in their favor and AWS were not used in the 2001 general elections. Due to pressure from women within the party, however, the Labour government elected in 2001 then amended the Sex Equality Act to permit positive discrimination used by political parties. This amendment allowed AWS to return in the 2005 general election. See Childs and Krook 2012.

²² The number of regular and special districts changes each election, based on the census.

²³ Edgell, Amanda B. 2018. “Vying for a Man Seat: Gender Quotas and Sustainable Representation in Africa.” *African Studies Review* 61 (1): 185-214.

Second, Uganda's special districts are larger than the regular districts. The women MPs elected to the special district receive the same pay and the same budget, but they must perform constituency service for many more residents. This design sets reserved-seat women MPs up to fail: their reputation depends on outperforming the regular-seat MP in constituency service, but they serve more residents than the regular-seat MP. For these reasons, reserved seats are not considered an international best practice in effective quota design.

Rotating Districts: Rather than create permanent special districts or permanent super districts, countries could, each election, designate different districts for women-only races. The reserved districts change each election cycle, hence the name "rotating districts."²⁴

No country has implemented this quota design at the national level, but rotating districts exist at the subnational level in India. Since 1992, the Indian constitution has contained a statutory 33% gender quota for local government: one-third of village council chairpersons and one-third of village council members must be women. India is a federal country, and states may choose how to implement the constitutional mandate. Some states rotate which villages are subject to the gender quota each election cycle. In the initial election cycle, a lottery determines the first third of the villages that must run women; in the second election cycle, a lottery among the remaining two-thirds determines the next third that must run women; and in the third election cycle, the final third of villages are reserved for women. In the fourth cycle, the designations reset with a new lottery.

This method ensures that, over time, the effect of the reservations is diffused geographically. However, the rotation system interacts poorly with incumbency. For instance, if a male village head is elected but, in the next cycle, the village becomes reserved, he is forced to step down. Likewise, a woman village head could be forced to stand down once the village is no longer subject to the reservation, as parties and voters alike perceive they no longer must have a woman. For this reason, lotteries are not considered best practice.

Public funding as an additional enforcement mechanism

Most statutory gender quotas that include enforcement mechanisms opt for penalties, as in the case of barring parties from competing (Mexico) or fining non-compliant parties but still allowing them to compete (France).

In Canada in 2016, then-MP Kennedy Stewart introduced a private member's bill that would have reduced public funds disbursed to parties that had more than a 10 percentage point gender gap between their men and women general election candidates. This mechanism would have created a back-door to parity: rather than explicitly stating the requirement for parties to practice gender parity in their nominations, a fine would have been levied on parties failing to do so. This bill did not pass, and no country currently applies a de facto quota enforced by financial penalties

²⁴ Christensen, Skye, and Gabrielle Bardall. 2016. "Gender Quotas in Single-Member District Electoral Systems." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 4 (2): 246-267.

alone. The state of the art is a statute that directly states the quota mandate *and also* includes a separate section detailing enforcement.²⁵

Still, Stewart's bill did match a popular approach to enforcing gender quotas: leveraging the public money that governments give parties to fund political campaigns. Here, measures can either *lower* the money parties receive for failing to reach the quota thresholds (as Stewart proposed for Canada) or *boost* the money parties receive for achieving the thresholds.²⁶ Lowering acts as a penalty, whereas boosting acts as an incentive. In practice, however, neither prove effective *unless* parties depend heavily on public money. If parties have alternative sources of campaign funds, then as with fines, parties are willing to sacrifice money in order to evade gender quotas.

South Korea and Ireland use public funding as a penalty, with lowering public money as the sole enforcement mechanism. In Ireland, the penalty packs a punch because parties rely on public funding for most of their campaign activities.²⁷ The Irish statute stipulates that parties failing to meet the 40% statutory candidate gender quota are penalized with a 50% reduction in public funds each year until the next election. The penalty proves effective, as women's candidacies increased by 90 percent following adoption in 2016.²⁸

South Korea's penalty is less successful, largely because of the lower threshold, the weak language, and parties' and candidates' reliance on private donations over public funds. South Korea's quota statute says parties should endeavor to reach a 30% threshold in the single-member districts. To address parties' widespread non-compliance, South Korean women MPs successfully lobbied for a 2006 electoral reform called the "Women's Nomination Subsidy."²⁹ The subsidy reduces the money that parties receive when they collectively fail to reach the 30% target in the single-member districts. If no party meets the 30% target, then only 50% of the subsidy is distributed, and only to parties that nominated between 15% and 30% women. If no party nominates more than 15% women, then only 25% of the subsidy is distributed, and only to parties nominating between 5% and 15% women. Yet parties continue to sacrifice public funds rather than meet the target. In the 2012, 2016, and 2020 elections, the average proportion of women candidates nominated by parties was 12%.³⁰ Only one party—a new party that won no seats in 2020—crossed the 30% threshold.³¹

²⁵ Though as seen, many countries include the mandate without enforcement, as in Nepal and Uzbekistan.

²⁶ Unless otherwise sourced, all measures about public finance penalties and incentives are drawn from: Ohman, Magnus. 2018. "Gender-Targeted Public Funding for Political Parties." Stockholm: International IDEA. p. 50. <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/gender-targeted-public-funding-for-political-parties.pdf>.

²⁷ Buckley, Fiona, and Rachel Gregory. 2020. "Gendering Candidate Selection in Ireland: Incentivizing Parties Through State Funding." In *Gendered Electoral Financing*, Ragnhild L. Muriaas, Vibeke Wang, and Rainbow Murray (eds). New York: Routledge, 55-73.

²⁸ Buckley and Gregory 2020, p. 55.

²⁹ Shin, Ki-young, and Soo Hyn Kwon. 2022. "'Above it All, It Will Boil Down to Money Problems': The Impact of Gender Targeted Public Financing on Political Parties and Women Candidates in South Korea." *International Political Science Review* 44 (1): 91-106.

³⁰ Average calculated from Shin and Kwon 2022, Table 3.

³¹ Shin and Kwon 2022.

Brazil uses boosting public money as the sole enforcement mechanism.³² The 30% statutory candidate gender quota was adopted in 1997, with no enforcement mechanism. In response to the persistent low numbers of women nominated and elected, Brazilian officials added the public funding incentive only in 2021. The measure works as follows: in the formula used to determine the public funds allocated to each party on a per-candidate basis, women candidates count twice and men candidates once. Yet there is no evidence the measure inspires parties to nominate more women than they must. In 2018, before the reform, women comprised 32% of candidates, and in 2022, after the reform, this figure climbed to just 33%.³³ Though Brazilian parties do reach the threshold, women comprise only 18.1% of Brazil's lower house. Brazil's quota design does not include rules about candidate placement, a weakness for which other design elements cannot compensate: the evidence demonstrates that parties run women candidates as "sacrificial lambs"—in districts where they expect to lose.³⁴

Other countries combine statutory candidate gender quotas with non-financial enforcement mechanisms, but add financial incentives for parties that elect (rather than merely nominate) women. This design encourages parties to go beyond minimal compliance. Chile presents this combination.³⁵ The country has a 40% candidate gender quota that parties must fill, or else they cannot register their candidates. Chile uses multi-member districts that are elected via open lists, meaning voters cast preference votes for individual candidates, allowing candidates to move up or down in the final rank-order. To incentivize parties to nominate women in winnable districts and to support women in competing for preference votes, Chile boosts the "fiscal reimbursement" parties receive after the election, which covers certain campaign expenses. Parties will receive an additional reimbursement of 500 "fiscal units" for every woman they elect (equivalent to \$29,300 CAD in 2025). Parties comply with the quota due to the enforcement mechanism that would bar them from registering their candidates, but there is little evidence the financial bonus has encouraged parties to better support women candidates.³⁶

A statutory candidate gender quota for Canada

This review of gender quota design reveals that Mexico has designed and implemented the most effective statutory candidate gender quota for a single-member district electoral system. Mexico elects a parliament with perfect gender parity. The most effective gender quota design for Canada would follow the elements found within the Mexican quota design where (1) the technical design combines mandatory language, a parity threshold, and a prohibition on

³² Other countries including a funding boost as a sole or additional enforcement mechanism for statutory gender quotas are Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Mali, Moldova, Niger, and Ukraine. The Solomon Islands provide a funding boost for parties that elect women *without* having a statutory gender quota.

³³ CEPIA. 2022. "Women's Political Participation in the 2022 Elections." Available at: <https://cepia.org.br/2022/08/18/womens-political-participation-in-the-2022-elections/>.

³⁴ Gatto, Malu A.C., and Kristin Wylie. 2022. "Informal Institutions and Gendered Candidate Selection in Brazilian Parties." *Party Politics* 28 (4): 727-738.

³⁵ Countries combining statutory gender quotas with financial incentives to parties that boost the number of women *elected* include Cabo Verde, Croatia, Colombia, and Romania.

³⁶ Piscopo, Jennifer M., Magda Hinojosa, Gwynn Thomas, and Peter M. Siavelis. 2022. "Follow the Money: Gender, Incumbency, and Campaign Funding in Chile." *Comparative Political Studies* 55 (2): 222-253.

assigning women exclusively to losing districts and (2) the enforcement mechanism includes a strict prohibition on non-compliant parties' ability to enter the election. Public financing incentives constitute an additional option to further encourage parties to assign women candidates to winning districts, but cannot be relied upon as the sole enforcement mechanism.

Mandatory elements:

- ✓ Gender parity among parties' candidates across all ridings
- ✓ Obligatory language ("parties must") rather than ("parties should")
- ✓ Rule requiring parties to practice gender parity not just across ridings, but within their groups of winning and competitive ridings
- ✓ Enforcement mechanism that imposes high costs: non-compliant parties are given an opportunity to correct their candidate registry, but if they do not do so within a stipulated window, they cannot enter the election

Optional elements:

- ✓ Further incentives to parties to translate women's nomination into women's election, such as additional public funds awarded to parties on the basis of the percentage women elected
- ✓