

Political exclusion lingers for women in Latin America



By **Jana Morgan** May 15

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Kim Yi Dionne: This post is the last of a three-part series on recent political science scholarship that examines gender and political leadership around the world. The first post by [Farida Jalalzai](#) discussed global trends of women achieving executive office, and the second by [Leonardo Arriola and Martha Johnson](#) examined women's influence in African governance. Today's post is a contribution from [Jana Morgan](#), Associate Professor of Political Science and Chair of Latin American and Caribbean Studies at the University of Tennessee. Her research focuses on issues of inequality, exclusion and representation, especially how economic, social and political inequalities affect marginalized groups and undermine democratic institutions and outcomes. Her post draws from "[Latin American Attitudes toward Women in Politics: The Influence of Elite Cues, Female](#)

*[Advancement, and Individual Characteristics](#),” an article which appeared in the *American Political Science Review*, and “[Gender and the Latin American Voter](#),” which is part of *The Latin American Voter*, a volume edited by Ryan Carlin, Matthew Singer and Elizabeth Zechmeister.*

Latin America has seen dramatic increases in women’s presence in national politics over the past 25 years. Six Latin American countries have elected female presidents since 1990, and women currently govern three of the region’s largest countries – Argentina, Brazil, and Chile.

Outside the presidency, women’s representation as [national lawmakers](#) and [Cabinet ministers](#) has also grown. In the 1990s, less than 10 percent of lawmakers across the region were women, today (in part thanks to [gender quota laws](#)) women hold more than 20 percent of seats in the region’s legislatures. Female representation as cabinet ministers has nearly tripled over the past 25 years from about 8 percent to 22 percent of Cabinet appointments.

However, these gains may not be signs of permanent progress toward sustained female influence in politics. Public support for women in politics varies across the region, and men are consistently less enthusiastic than women about female leadership. In some countries, like Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, and Guyana, a majority of men believe women are not as effective leaders as are male politicians.

Figure 1: Percent who disagree that men make better political leaders than women, by country and sex

Source: [LAPOP](#); Figure: Jana Morgan/The Monkey Cage

In a recent American Political Science Review [article](#) co-authored with [Melissa Buice](#), we analyzed these attitudes toward female leadership and found that recent trends toward greater representation for women do not necessarily have their foundation in firm or immutable egalitarian values. Instead, **support for female leadership, especially among men is context-dependent** and thus prone to reversal.

First, **male attitudes are influenced by elite cues**. Where (typically male) presidents do not nominate women to the Cabinet, male voters are less likely to favor female leadership. Thus, elite actions that fail to promote women's political credibility can erode or stymie men's support for women in politics.

Second, **economic opportunities for women produce a backlash effect among men**. In countries

where more professional jobs are filled by women, male support for female leadership is low. Therefore, although opportunities for professional advancement heighten gender egalitarianism among individual female professionals who directly benefit from this progress, such advancement does not produce broader, society-wide dividends. Instead, men seem to perceive economic progress for women as a threat, creating a cyclical dynamic in gender egalitarian attitudes rather than promoting steady progress (at least among men).

Third, **support for women in leadership is higher among women and men who are frustrated with the status quo**, but this effect is only present when female politicians are largely excluded from positions of power. In these contexts, women are viewed as outsiders who may disrupt entrenched hierarchies or reform failed institutions. As a result, those dissatisfied with the current state of affairs are more likely to support female leadership. However as women make gains in achieving national representation, they lose their outsider status and no longer appeal to those seeking an alternative to the unsatisfactory status quo. The figure below displays this conditional relationship among women (the effect is similar among men).

Figure 2: Effect of trust in government on support for female leadership, conditioned on women’s presence in the cabinet (female respondents)

Shaded area demonstrates that less trusting individuals are more supportive of female leadership provided the share of female cabinet ministers is less than 0.34.

Moreover, the above finding together with negative fallout from Laura Chinchilla's recently concluded presidency in Costa Rica suggests that **poor governance by individual female politicians may undermine abstract gender egalitarian attitudes**. This erosion is particularly likely among people whose egalitarian attitudes have primarily utilitarian motivations, based on the rationale that female leaders may provide solutions to a broken political system. Overall, our analysis indicates that promoting gender egalitarian political attitudes is not an automatic process that will simply reinforce itself as women make economic and political gains.

The substantive impact of advances in women's descriptive representation remain uncertain as well. Women's concerns are frequently outside mainstream political debates throughout Latin America. In a forthcoming [chapter](#) examining gender and voting behavior in the region, I find that parties and party systems are not connecting effectively with women through typical policy appeals and ideological position-taking. When parties offer meaningful policy alternatives to voters, these options influence men but not women, because women do not view the parties' agendas as relevant to their primary concerns.

Women also do not see male politicians as likely to take up issues that particularly concern women. As a result, **women tend to vote for female candidates when they are presented with the option, even if the**

female candidate does not share their ideological inclination or partisan affiliation. Thus, female voters calculate that a woman in office is more likely to stand for their concerns than a male candidate who shares their policy preferences. Men, on the other hand, are motivated more by a candidate's ideology than their gender.

Overall, despite significant advances in women's presence in the Latin American political sphere, opportunities for substantive influence lag behind descriptive representation, and gender egalitarian attitudes in the mass public remain vulnerable to reversals.

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For policymakers and activists wishing to promote gender equality, my research suggests several possible strategies. First, given the importance of elite cues, pushing leaders to promote women's access to power has the potential to encourage support for feminist goals among men (provided women's performance in office does associate them with a failed political class). Second, because access to education and professional occupations promotes feminist consciousness among women, expanding female educational and employment opportunities may facilitate women's political progress as well. Finally, by highlighting how female voters often remain disengaged from established dimensions of political contestation and therefore represent a significant, untapped source of support, entrepreneurial parties and political elites in the region might be encouraged to advocate for women's concerns.