

# After weeks of Latin American protests, expect to see more women elected to office | The Washington Post

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Parties nominate more women when citizens distrust government — because so many people believe women are more honest

For several weeks, angry Latin Americans have been protesting in the streets. In Bolivia, citizens are protesting allegedly fraudulent election results. In Chile and Ecuador, they've been marching and destroying property over economic inequality. And in Peru, battles over corruption reform led the president to dissolve congress, resulting in demonstrations and cries of a coup.

The eruption of protests suggests that Latin American governments are having difficulties delivering what voters care about: fair elections, honest politicians and economic redistribution. Analysts have suggested that the protests may lead voters to choose leftists and prompt governments to end economic austerity. Our research identifies another possibility: more women elected to office.

Our research finds that Latin American political parties nominate more women for office when citizens distrust their current leaders or are angry about corruption. Gender stereotypes matter: Women in politics are seen as outsiders and as less corrupt. So parties choose women to signal change. We'll explain below.

## How we studied women's nominations in Latin America

We analyzed 33 elections held in 18 Latin American countries between 2004 and 2012, including in Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador and Peru. Because our data span nearly a decade, we looked at two elections in most countries. In total, our data cover about 110 political parties.

We used the Inter-American Development Bank's project on Gender and Political Parties in Latin America to identify the proportion of women nominated by each party to run for the

national legislature. We then used data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project to measure what we call “the decision environment” — meaning the factors that influence which candidates parties choose. Specifically, we examined whether voters trust parties and trust congress, and whether voters believe that corruption is widespread in each country.

Of course, many other factors affect parties’ decisions about which candidates to run. We built a data set that measured other characteristics of the party, the country and the decision environment. That included party ideology, meaning whether the party leaned left or right; and whether the party supported women in other ways, such as mentioning gender equality in its core documents. We also measured whether the country had a gender quota, a law requiring that parties nominate specific percentages of women. Thirteen of 18 Latin American countries had quota laws during that time.

## Public discontent leads parties to nominate more women

In our first study, we found that parties nominate more women as voters lose trust in political parties. Falling trust got women on the ballot — a factor that stood out even after our statistical models accounted for other explanations, like parties’ left ideology and national gender quota laws. When voters lose faith in parties, Latin American parties turn to women to signal change.

In our second study, we looked at citizens’ trust in their legislatures and their perceptions of corruption. We found that parties nominated more women when many citizens distrust their legislators and view corruption as widespread — relying on perceptions that women are more honest than men to woo voters.

The relationship between public distrust in congress and increasing women’s nominations again persisted even when we accounted for parties’ ideology, countries’ gender quota laws and other factors.

## Gender stereotypes affect women’s access to elected office

As citizens lose trust in parties and in congress, the gender stereotypes that associate women

with a “fresh start” and greater honesty make women more attractive candidates.

To be sure, we do not know exactly what party leaders think about women. Our research shows that women are nominated in contexts of distrust, but we cannot tell whether party leaders hold gender stereotypes themselves or whether party leaders think voters hold these stereotypes. Either way, we see that increasing citizen dissatisfaction leads parties to choose women.

That matters — because when more women are nominated, more women are elected. We found a nearly 1-to-1 relationship between women’s nominations and women’s elections. Every percentage increase in women nominated yielded a similar percentage increase in women elected, even after accounting for a slew of other potential explanations.

## Protests could result in more female candidates

As people take to the streets in Latin America, parties may turn to women to restore their images and boost their electoral fortunes.

Voters’ discontent has been brewing for some time. The Latin American Public Opinion Project’s 2018-2019 survey reports that 58 percent of Chileans distrust their legislature, up 30 percentage points from 10 years ago. Similarly, 81 percent of Peruvians distrust their congress, while only 63 percent did a decade ago.

But the women who may be nominated and elected as a result will be facing outside expectations. If the newly elected women don’t reduce citizen discontent, their perceived failure may enforce a different gender stereotype: the belief that women can’t handle the job. Research from Canada found that women elected during difficult times had shorter tenures in office. They were also more likely than men to be forced to resign.

Women could also find themselves excluded once things get better. If citizens begin to feel more positively about their political leaders and institutions, parties could return to nominating their preferred candidates: men.