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NSF Diversifying Leadership and Ending Discrimination in POSC

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What Happens When You “Do Everything Right”

Like others would like to thank the organizers for inviting me to this workshop.

What I would like to do is two things. First, as others have done, I would like to talk a little bit about my own research, and see what might be relevant to our discussions here, although I think many of the points have been made already. Second, as others have done, I would like to talk about some recent developments in my own department and what might have done or could still be done for things to turn out differently.

So I am a scholar of African politics with a focus for the last decade or so on women’s political leadership in SSA, in particular in national legislatures through the use of electoral gender quotas, but also in executives and judiciaries. So, as you probably know, several African countries are way ahead of the US and some other developed countries in terms of women’s representation in parliament, with Rwanda leading the world with 65 percent women in its chamber of deputies and several other countries in the 30 and 40 percent range.

The interesting thing, as you may also know, is that in most cases these percentages have been accomplished through the adoption and use of some kind of electoral gender quota. This is actually a worldwide phenomenon, not unique to Africa, though there are some features of quota use unique to Africa. Using electoral gender quotas has been called ‘taking the fast track’ to women’s greater representation and means that in the course of one election you can completely change the gender composition of a parliament. I am wondering if in the language of this workshop this might be a strategy of insurgency, as opposed to what is the other approach, referred to as the incremental approach to increasing women’s representation

Why quotas? Some of things Kira mentioned: to level the playing field/overcome all the obstacles that we know are there for women candidates and to break through the gatekeepers/the resistant political parties. Why have African countries or in some cases political parties adopted these quotas? There have been two waves of quota adoption and I would like to talk about each of those briefly.

The first wave in the 1990s and early 2000s was typically because of a political transition usually in the wake of a political conflict, that led to the drawing up of a new constitution and adoption of new electoral laws; there was pressure from mobilized national women’s movements oftentimes in collaboration with an international women’s movement and an increasing embrace of international norms around women’s political representation; there was the work of IOs, continental and regional organizations and NGOs, as well as a diffusion effect across political parties from one country to another, or simply across national borders.

The second wave has been since the 2010s and has not been marked by post-conflict or political transitions, but usually there has been a constitutional reform process at play, and again, pressure from mobilized national women's movements in collaboration with organizations like the African Union or UNWomen. Here too, as quota use has become so widespread across the continent, I would suggest that diffusion effects are at work: yesterday we heard about U Georgia and U Miss; so Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria has been quoted as saying that if SA can have 45 percent women in its cabinet, then Nigeria can have 35 percent women.

What has been especially interesting to me about this second wave, is that it has been about strengthening existing quotas, as well as putting new ones in place. And in many cases, such as Senegal and Tanzania, the goal is parity – no reason to mess around with only 20 or 30 percent women, these legislative bodies should represent their populations and both countries have done or will do this.

Lastly, I would say that nearly two decades of research shows us pretty clearly that there have been symbolic and substantive representation effects of having more women in these parliaments – so things like: altering gendered ideas about the roles of women and men in politics, encouraging women to become more engaged in politics, promoting or accomplishing certain policy agendas or legislative items etc

So what is there to learn from this research for our conversations?

- Most importantly perhaps is the idea of political opportunity structures, as came up several times yesterday; in SSA this has been the political transitions of the last two decades. But where there is no apparent opportunity, you have to make one, so that would be the constitutional reform processes in the second wave countries that I also spoke of.
- Second, the idea of mobilizing and organizing and in particular of something like a women's caucus. So in those countries in which the greatest impacts of more women in parliament have been felt, it is because of the work of women's caucuses that have been created across party lines and because women MPs have been pushed by women's movements in their countries.
- Third, the idea of the emergence and acceptance and widespread diffusion of norms around women's representation across the globe. There is a feeling across SSA that there is no turning back; I think Karen or Denise may have said this yesterday in their presentations. It is not that progress is linear but there is a strong forward movement.

The second thing I would like to talk about briefly is my own department. I am motivated to do this after reading the Critical Perspectives pieces that Carol and Denise edited for Politics and Gender.

So my department story is a story of what happens when you do everything right? Ironically, it is a story of loss. We are a very diverse department in many ways, as I will talk about in a moment, and we have a strong woman chair – me - I have been chair for seven years – am in the third year of a second five year term. I will tell you the end of the story now: the answer is that you are told by your dean to put the science back into political science, your strong woman chair is removed, and a national search is launched to replace her and bring in someone who can implement the dean's vision of what the department should be/look like.

This all just happened this fall – in the wake of an academic program review. We had a review team come in this spring – with some of your colleagues and mentors on it, like Michael Correa Jones, Susan Carroll and Patrick Jackson. They said our department was a success story from top to bottom and had effective leadership most importantly from its chair.

So, let me just talk a little bit about the diversity in my department and what the implications of that diversity appear to have been - and maybe what we could have or should have been doing differently. We have around 22 faculty, with a couple of retirements in progress. Of those we are seven women and 15 men; of the 22 we are 2 AA men, one A woman, 2 AA men and 1 A woman, one Latino man, and two gay white men. We are a mix of native and foreign born and we are Christians Jews Muslims and atheists. We embrace and we celebrate our diversity. Moreover, we are not just seven women but five of the seven are feminist scholars who do gender and politics research in one way or another. We are also highly interdisciplinary, in that everyone contributes to or collaborates with other departments or programs: our Areas Studies programs, BAMS, WGS, etc In fact three of our gender scholars have 25 percent of their appointments in WGS.

Also, very importantly, we have a significant theoretical and methodological pluralism. I think this is the crux of the matter. So, as was suggested a few times yesterday, the faculty diversity that we have accomplished also means a diversity of theoretical approaches and research methodologies. Chances are good that diverse faculty engage in critical approaches. So in our department we have fewer positivist scholars who use quantitative methodologies, rather we utilize more interpretivist or critical approaches: feminist, postcolonial, constructivist, institutionalist, queer, with scholars who rely on qualitative methods. As one of my white male faculty said our diversity has protected us from having to become a department of number crunchers.

So the dean wants us to be a more typical or mainstream political science department, with a greater AP presence and emphasis, while we are heavy on CP and IR. He thinks if that is the case, we will also be better placed to bring in external research funding which will help to fund our graduate program, among other things.

What did we do wrong or what did we ignore? On the one hand, the resource imperative, which we talked about a lot yesterday – and which challenges many of our campuses today – and, on the other hand, the need for allies in important places across campus. So you can do all the good work that you want in your own department or your discipline, but if you do not have the support of your college or your university, then you are at risk. Diversity and interdisciplinarity can be buzz words all over campus but that commitment has to be tested and pushed. And you might not want to find out the result.....