

# Women in Parliament in 2007: The Year in Perspective



Photo: AFP

Women preparing to vote, Bhutan, 2007.

## Women's Representation in Parliament Continues to Improve, Just

At the end of 2007, women held 17.7 percent of all parliamentary seats—over 50 percent more than a decade ago when women held 11.8 percent. This represents a consistent but small annual increase of 0.6 percentage points on average.

During 2007, women took 2,013, or 16.9 percent, of the parliamentary seats up for renewal in 63 countries. Of the seats taken by women, 1,764 were directly elected, 116 were indirectly elected, and 133 were appointed. These figures represent a slight improvement over the results from 2006 when women took an average of 16.7 percent of the seats renewed.

Increases in women's representation were registered in 58 percent of the chambers renewed. However, in 20 percent of the chambers, women's representation remained the same as in the previous legislature. Worse, fewer women members were registered in 22 percent of the chambers renewed. When the overall gains women made in 2007 are considered together with the stagnation and reversals in some countries, it becomes clear that there is little room for complacency when it comes to improving women's access to parliaments.

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## Highlights of Women in Parliament in 2007

### Globally

- Across all chambers of parliament, the world average of women representatives has reached an all-time high of 17.7 percent.
- On average, women took 16.9 percent of the seats in the 78 chambers that were renewed in 2007. Increases in women's representation were registered in 58 percent of those chambers.
- In 13 chambers, women gained 30 percent or more of the seats up for renewal. The parliaments of Argentina and Finland have surpassed 40 percent women members and in the Senate of the Bahamas women hold 60 percent of the seats.
- Electoral systems matter: women gained more seats in parliamentary chambers elected using a proportional electoral system, 18.3 percent, compared to 13.8 percent for those elected with a majority or plurality electoral system.

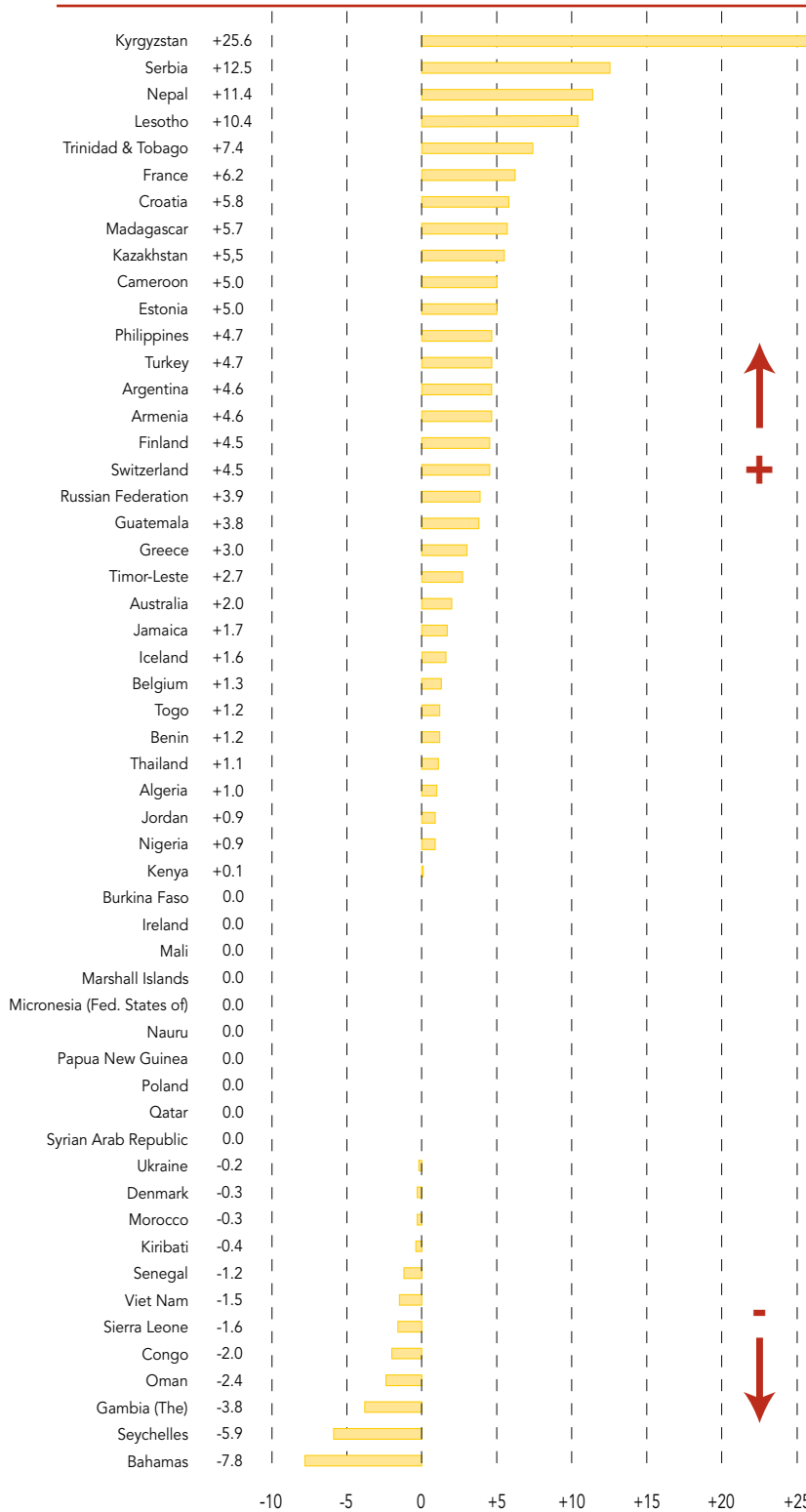
### Regionally

- The Americas registered some impressive gains for women during 2007: an average of 28 percent of the seats renewed in the 10 chambers went to women.
- The Nordic countries continued to elect the highest number of women to their parliaments. Their regional average increased to 41.4 percent after Denmark, Finland and Iceland elected significant numbers of women to their parliaments.
- The Pacific Island States had the lowest return rate of women to parliament in 2007, at 1.8 percent. No women were elected in the Federated States of Micronesia and in Nauru.

**Table 1: Parliamentary Renewals in 2007**

**A. Progress and Setbacks of Women in Lower or Single Houses of Parliament that held Elections in 2007**

*The figures show the percentage point difference between renewals in 2007 compared with the previous legislature*



**B. Women in Lower or Single Houses after parliamentary renewals in 2007**

Country	Total seats filled	Total women	% Total Women	Quota
Finland	200	84	42.0	No
Argentina (1)	255	102	40.0	Yes**
Denmark	179	67	37.4	No
Belgium	150	55	36.7	Yes**
Iceland	63	20	31.7	Yes*
Switzerland	200	59	29.5	Yes*
Timor-Leste	65	18	27.7	Yes*
Trinidad & Tobago	41	11	26.8	No
Australia	150	40	26.7	Yes*
Viet Nam	493	127	25.8	No
Kyrgyzstan	90	23	25.6	Yes**
Estonia	101	24	23.8	No
Croatia	153	36	23.5	Yes*
Lesotho	119	28	23.5	No
Seychelles	34	8	23.5	No
Poland	460	94	20.4	Yes*
Philippines	240	49	20.4	Yes**
Serbia	250	51	20.4	Yes**
France	577	107	18.5	No
Senegal	150	27	18.0	Yes*
Nepal (2)	329	57	17.3	No
Greece	300	48	16.0	No
Kazakhstan	107	17	15.9	No
Russian Federation	450	63	14.0	No
Cameroon	180	25	13.9	Yes*
Jamaica	60	8	13.3	No
Ireland	166	22	13.3	Yes*
Sierra Leone	124	16	12.9	No
Bahamas	41	5	12.2	No
Guatemala	158	19	12.0	No
Syrian Arab Republic	250	30	12.0	No
Thailand	477	56	11.7	No
Burkina Faso	111	13	11.7	Yes*
Morocco	325	34	10.5	Yes#
Mali	147	15	10.2	Yes*
Madagascar	127	12	9.4	No
Gambia (The)	53	5	9.4	No
Armenia	131	12	9.2	Yes**
Turkey	550	50	9.1	No
Togo	81	7	8.6	No
Ukraine	450	38	8.4	No
Benin	83	7	8.4	No
Algeria	389	30	7.7	Yes*
Congo	137	10	7.3	No
Kenya (3)	207	15	7.2	No
Nigeria	358	25	7.0	No
Jordan	110	7	6.4	Yes#
Kiribati	46	2	4.3	No
Marshall Islands	33	1	3.0	No
Papua New Guinea	109	1	0.9	No
Micronesia (Federated States of)	14	0	0	No
Nauru	18	0	0	No
Oman	84	0	0	No
Qatar	35	0	0	No

**Note:**  
 1. Argentina: The chamber renews half its members every two years. Elections in 2007 were held for 130 seats. These results reflect the overall composition of the chamber after the election.  
 2. Nepal: After the promulgation of the interim constitution in January 2007, the House of Representatives dissolved itself in favour of a 330-member interim legislature, called the Legislative Parliament. This interim legislature comprises all members of the previous parliament and other appointed members. It is due to be replaced by an elected, unicameral 425-member Constituent Assembly in 2008.  
 3. Kenya: Women took 15 of the 207 directly elected seats. These figures exclude 12 appointed and two ex-officio members.  
 \* Voluntary quota adopted by one or more political party  
 \*\* Legislated candidate quota,  
 # Seats reserved for women

## A Critical Mass of Women

The number of countries where women reached or surpassed a critical mass of 30 percent representation in parliament remained even in 2007. In all, there are 20 countries around the world in which women have a critical mass in lower or single houses of parliament, five of which held elections during 2007: Argentina, Belgium, Denmark, Finland and Iceland. The critical mass is important as it is widely considered to be the level at which women's representation in parliament is great enough to influence policies and institutions.

The impressive results in Finland and Argentina mean that they join Rwanda and Sweden as the handful of countries that have elected more than 40 percent women to lower or single chambers. The world leader, Rwanda, has 48.8 percent women in its lower house, followed by Sweden at 47 percent. Finland elected 42 percent women to its parliament, the highest number ever, which helped boost the average regional representation for women in the Nordic countries to an all-time high of 41.4 percent. Argentina elected 40 percent women to its lower chamber for the first time, a percentage that is mandated by law.

Belgium, Denmark and Iceland elected over 30 percent women. Belgium, too, has a law requiring political parties to nominate at least 33 percent women. Those parties that do not meet the target face sanctions. In Iceland, some political parties have adopted voluntary quotas ensuring that women hold at least one-third of party nominations. In Denmark, political parties had previously had voluntary quotas to boost women's representation in parliament. Today, most parties routinely nominate women in large numbers in winnable positions.

Some of the most significant changes occurred in eight upper houses which gained a critical mass of women during 2007. The upper house of the Bahamas now has the highest proportion of women members ever, at 60 percent, all of whom were appointed. In addition, three other upper houses appointed a critical mass of women: Lesotho, Senegal and Trinidad and Tobago.



Woman voting, Timor-Leste, 2007.

Photo: AFP.

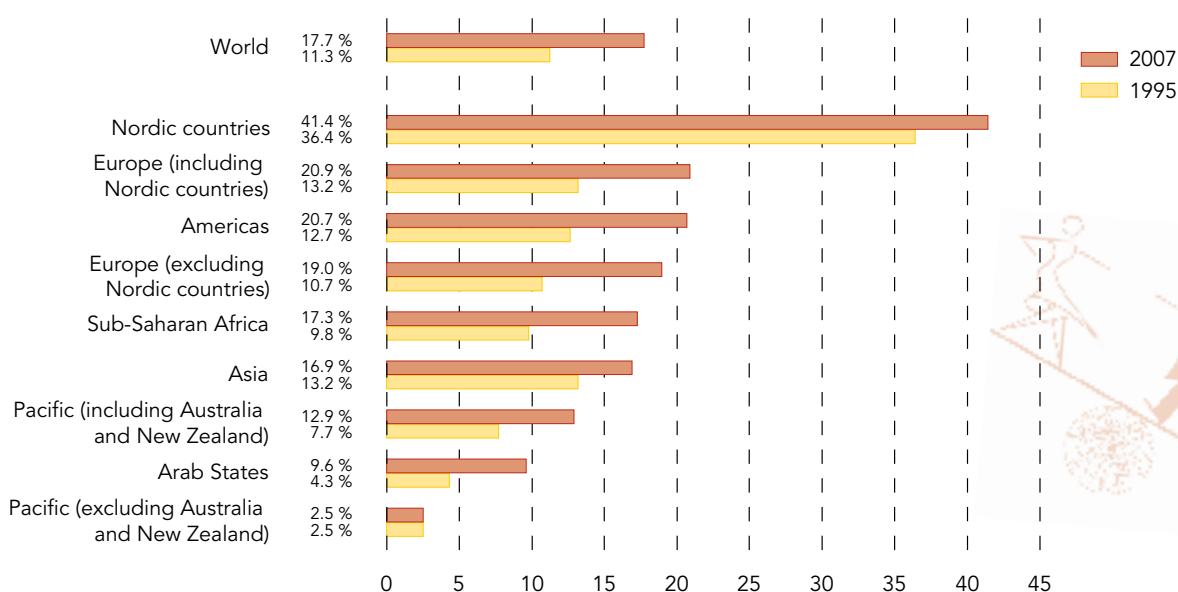
Argentina, Australia and Belgium elected, and the Netherlands indirectly elected, more than 30 percent women to their upper chambers, with all four countries using some form of electoral quota to boost women's rates of election.

## A Year of Regional Highs and Lows

There are great differences in the ratio of women in lower or single houses of parliament, ranging from a high of 42 percent in Finland to a low of zero women in Qatar, Micronesia, Nauru and Palau. In upper houses, too, women's representation varies from 60 percent

**Table 2: World and Regional Averages of Women in Parliaments, 1995-2007**

Situation for all chambers of Parliaments combined in December of each year\*



\* The percentages do not take into account parliaments for which data is not available.



in the Bahamas to less than five percent in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Not surprisingly, the highest representation overall was found in the **Nordic** countries, which brought the average across all countries in the region to 41.4 percent.

Some impressive gains were registered in the **Americas**: women gained 28 percent of seats, on average, for the ten chambers renewed in 2007. Overall, women hold more than 20 percent of seats across the region. This is largely attributable to the seats women gained in Argentina, and in the Caribbean states of the Bahamas (upper house) and Trinidad and Tobago. Both chambers of the Argentine Congress have record numbers of women, placing Argentina fourth in the world ranking of women's representation in parliament. As mentioned above, the Bahamas' upper house has the highest representation of women of any chamber in the world at 60 percent. At the same time, however, the Bahamas registered the biggest percentage-point drop in its lower house, from 20 to 12.2 percent. This may be explained by the fact that the upper house is appointed and the lower house is elected by majority vote, the electoral system that often hinders women's success.

The largest percentage-point gain in 2007, from zero to 25 percent, was registered in Kyrgyzstan. The previous election in 2005 saw the number of women plummet to zero as the country moved from a bicameral to a unicameral parliament with a majority electoral system. In 2007, the number of seats in the chamber was increased from 75 to 90, and seats were filled from party lists using a proportional representation electoral system. Under that system, parties were required to ensure that at least 30 percent of the candidates on their lists were women. In Turkey too women gained in the election. After women's groups mobilized to improve the poor showing of women in parliament, the number of women elected doubled to 50, or 9.1 percent of the total, the highest ever reached in Turkey.

In addition to Belgium and the Netherlands, Switzerland increased its female membership to just a fraction shy of 30 percent. Estonia, Croatia and Ireland elected the most women ever to their chambers, bringing the average regional representation of women in **Europe** to 20.9 percent in lower or single chambers. Although falling short of the legislated parity between women and men in elective positions, France registered gains in an electoral campaign that gave prominence to the role of women in politics. It moved from 12 to 18.5 percent, the highest proportion reached in the lower house.

The consistent rate of progress in **Africa** was largely sustained through the 20 parliamentary chambers renewed in 2007. The average representation of women in lower or single houses across the region rose to 17.3 percent. Women made a 10 percentage-point gain in the lower chamber in Lesotho to reach 23.5 percent, the same proportion elected in the Seychelles. Madagascar doubled the number of its female members, although the total remains below 10 percent. The number of women remained unchanged in Burkina Faso and Mali. Setbacks were registered in the lower or single houses of the Gambia and Seychelles, and the post-conflict states of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sierra Leone, all of which lost two women each. All four of those chambers were elected with a majority electoral system. Sierra Leone changed its electoral system from a proportional to a majority system, which may partly account for the results. In contrast, women fared well in the upper houses of Senegal and Lesotho, where they were appointed to 40 and 30 percent of the seats respectively.

Progress continued in **Asia**, although few parliamentary elections took place. Timor-Leste registered the highest overall number of women elected, at 27.7 percent, followed by Viet Nam at

25.8 percent (a slight decrease over the previous election) and the Philippines at 20.4 percent. Elections in Timor-Leste and Viet Nam were preceded by political debates about the adoption of special measures to increase the representation of women, although no legislated quotas were adopted. The average representation of women in lower or single chambers across Asia is just below 17 percent.

Renewals took place in eight chambers in the **Arab States**, but with no impressive gains for women compared to previous years. The proportion of women remained the same in the Syrian Arab Republic, at 12 percent, while Algeria and Jordan registered slight increases. Several women pushed for a legislated quota ahead of the election in Algeria; however, no quota was adopted. In Morocco, political parties continued to reserve 10 percent of parliamentary seats for women, many of whom are newcomers to parliament. Very few women were elected outside of the reserved seats, highlighting the important role parties play in promoting women's candidacies and ensuring continuity between the new and former members of parliament. Jordan continued to reserve six seats for women, while another woman won an open seat. In Oman, although 21 women stood as candidates, none received enough votes to be elected. In contrast, women were appointed to 20 percent of the seats in its upper house. Qatar renewed its parliament, but no women were included among the

## *Women in Top Positions of Power*

In January 2008, women held 28 of the 262 **presiding officer** posts in parliaments around the world, a decrease from a year ago when 35 women held the top position in parliament. The number of women presiding officers has hovered around the 10-percent mark for the past 10 years. The highest concentrations are in the Caribbean and in Europe, with eight women presiding officers in each region. Five women hold this position in Africa, followed by four in the Americas and three in Asia and the Pacific.

### *Women Presiding Officers of Parliaments as of 1 January 2008: 28 of 262 posts (10.7%)*

Albania (unicameral); Antigua and Barbuda (lower and upper houses); Austria (lower house); Bahamas (upper house); Belize (lower house); Colombia (upper house); Dominica (unicameral); Estonia (unicameral); the Gambia (unicameral); Georgia (unicameral); Hungary (unicameral); Israel (unicameral); Lesotho (lower house); Mexico (lower house); Netherlands (lower and upper houses); New Zealand (unicameral); Saint Kitts and Nevis (lower house); Saint Lucia (lower and upper houses); South Africa (lower house); Swaziland (upper house); Turkmenistan (unicameral); United Kingdom (upper house); United States of America (lower house); Venezuela (unicameral) and Zimbabwe (upper house).

A glance at the number of women **heads of state** and **heads of government** reveals that these remain the most elusive positions for women. Only seven of 150 elected heads of state (4.7%) are women (those of Argentina, Chile, Finland, India, Ireland, Liberia and the Philippines). Only eight of 192 governments (4.2%) are headed by women. In January 2008, women hold 16.1 percent of ministerial posts across the world. Women fill 30 percent or more of the positions in the executive in 17 countries, with Finland leading the group at nearly 58 percent women, followed by Norway (56%) and Grenada (50%).

appointments. On average, women hold less than 10 percent of parliamentary seats in the Arab States.

## A Long Path for Women in the Pacific

The lowest return rate for women in 2007 was registered in the Pacific Islands States, at less than two percent, on average. The parliaments of Kiribati, Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru and Papua New Guinea were renewed. Two women won seats in the 46-member house in Kiribati, one woman was elected out of 33 members in the Marshall Islands, and one woman out of 109 members in Papua New Guinea. No women were successful in the elections in Micronesia, which has never had a female parliamentarian, or in Nauru, where only a handful of women has ever held seats in parliament.

Three other Pacific Islands States—Palau, the Solomon Islands and Tuvalu—have no women representatives either, making this sub-region a virtual ‘no-go zone’ for women. Women’s contributions are largely limited to the domestic sphere. While a handful of female candidates did present themselves for election in these states, none received enough votes to be elected, illustrating that even women do not vote in large numbers for women candidates.

These results in the Pacific Island States are in stark contrast to the gains women made in Australia. Women took nearly 27 percent of the seats in the lower house, the highest proportion ever, and 35 percent of the seats in the upper house.

## Accounting for the Numbers

Women’s access to parliaments continues to increase around the world. In the majority of chambers renewed during 2007, women garnered more seats than they had in the previous leg-

islature. However, in 42 percent of the chambers renewed, the representation of women either stagnated or decreased when compared with the previous results. What factors account for women’s varied access to parliaments?

The poor showing of women in the parliaments of the Pacific Islands States is a good example of how the confluence of different factors can have a negative impact. Not only do cultural and social perceptions tend to limit the value of women’s contributions to the domestic realm, but parliaments are elected using majority electoral systems, which place women in direct competition with men. Political parties are weak or non-existent, which makes introducing special measures, such as quotas, through party channels impossible. The combined effects of electoral systems and quotas are also evident in other regions.

## Electoral Systems Matter

Electoral and party systems have an important impact on women’s rates of election. Women are generally elected in greater numbers in proportional systems than they are in constituency-based electoral systems. The results from elections in 2007 support this finding:

- In the 21 chambers using proportional representation, women were elected to an average of 18.3 percent of the seats.
- In the 21 chambers using majority or plurality electoral systems, women were elected to an average of 13.8 percent of the seats.
- In the 10 chambers using mixed electoral systems (combining elements of proportional and majority electoral systems), women were elected to 16.2 percent of the seats.

There is a five percentage-point difference between chambers elected using a proportional representation system and those

**Table 3: Women in Upper Houses of Parliament in 2007**

Countries	Total Seats	Number of Women	% Women
Bahamas*	15	9	60.0
Senegal*	100	40	40.0
Argentina**	72	28	38.9
Belgium*	71	27	38.0
Australia**	76	27	35.5
Netherlands*	75	26	34.7
Trinidad & Tobago*	31	10	32.3
Lesotho*	33	10	30.3
Switzerland	46	10	21.7
Ireland*	60	13	21.7
Bhutan	15	3	20.0
Oman*	70	14	20.0
Saint Lucia*	11	2	18.2
Mauritania*	56	10	17.9
Philippines**	23	4	17.4
Japan**	242	42	17.4
Jamaica*	21	3	14.3
Bosnia & Herzegovina*	15	2	13.3
Jordan*	55	7	12.7
Nigeria	109	9	8.3
Poland	100	8	8.0
Egypt*	264	21	8.0
Slovenia*	40	3	7.5
Dem. Rep. of the Congo*	108	5	4.6

Seventy-six parliaments in the world are bicameral, composed of lower and upper houses. At 1 January 2008, women held 16.7 percent of the seats in upper houses, up from 9.8 percent one decade ago.

In 2007, 1,708 seats in 24 upper houses were renewed. Of these, women won 333 seats (19% of all members, on average). Half of the women were elected and half were appointed or indirectly elected.

Women fared the best in the Bahamas, where women were appointed to 60 percent of the seats, followed by Senegal at 40 percent. Eight upper houses returned 30 percent or more women to their chambers, more than ever before. Political appointments offer another way to increase women’s access to parliament.

\* Includes indirectly elected or appointed seats

\*\* Chamber was partially renewed – these figures refer to the overall composition after the renewal

**Table 4: Women Candidates and Women Elected in 2007**

	CANDIDATES				CANDIDATES ELECTED				ELECTION RATE (%)		QUOTA	
	Total Candidates	Men	Women	% Women	Total Elected	Men	Women	% Women	Men	Women	Quota	
<b>Majority/Plurality Electoral System</b>												
Australia	1054	782	272	34.8	150	110	40	26.7	14.1	14.7	Yes*	
France	7640	4463	3177	41.6	577	470	107	18.5	10.5	3.4	No	
Jordan	885	686	199	22.5	110	103	7	6.4	15.0	3.5	Yes#	
Kenya	2548	2279	269	10.6	207	192	15	7.2	8.4	5.6	No	
Nauru	74	68	6	8.1	18	18	0	0.0	26.5	0.0	No	
Oman	632	611	21	3.3	84	84	0	0.0	13.7	0.0	No	
Syrian Arab Republic	9783	8801	982	10.0	250	220	30	12.0	2.5	3.1	No	
Trinidad and Tobago	130	98	32	24.6	41	30	11	26.8	30.6	34.4	No	
<b>Mixed Electoral System</b>												
Armenia	1374	1088	286	20.8	131	119	12	9.2	10.9	4.2	Yes**	
Cameroon	595	535	60	10.1	180	155	25	13.9	29.0	41.7	Yes*	
<b>Proportional Representation Electoral System</b>												
Belgium (Upper House)	367	190	177	48.2	71	44	27	38.0	23.2	15.3	Yes**	
Belgium (Lower House)	1776	908	868	48.9	150	95	55	36.7	10.5	6.3	Yes**	
Estonia	975	711	264	27.1	101	77	24	23.8	10.8	9.1	No	
Finland	2004	1205	799	39.9	200	116	84	42.0	9.6	10.5	No	
Iceland	756	399	357	47.2	63	43	20	31.7	10.8	5.6	Yes*	
Ireland	470	388	82	17.4	166	144	22	13.3	37.1	26.8	Yes*	
Poland	6187	4759	1428	23.1	460	366	94	20.4	7.7	6.6	Yes*	
Turkey	18265	15032	3233	17.7	550	500	50	9.1	3.3	1.5	No	

\* Voluntary quota adopted by one or more political party

\*\* Legislated candidate quota

# Seats reserved for women

elected with a majority or plurality electoral system. Those chambers using a mixed electoral system fall in between, with 16.2 percent, possibly because those systems combine the best and the worst of the other systems. The reason why proportional systems tend to elect more women is that they provide greater opportunities for increasing women's representation by introducing special measures. For example, political parties may introduce a provision that a certain proportion of candidates on the party's electoral list be women. As voters usually elect a party list rather than an individual candidate, as in a majority system, there is a greater likelihood that women will be elected.

## Electoral Quotas

The effects of electoral quotas can also be gauged by examining the electoral results from 2007. In those countries that used some type of electoral quota, the average representation of women was 19.3 percent, as opposed to 14.7 percent for those countries without quotas. This trend is confirmed by the top performing countries that have reached 30 percent or more women in parliament. More than 80 percent of those countries use quotas. The positive effect of quotas in electing women to parliament is now well documented.



Women line up to vote, Guatemala, 2007.

Photo AFP.

Quotas are not the only mechanism to support women's participation. Some political parties promote the candidacies of women even if they have not formally adopted a quota policy. Others offer skills enhancement for women, such as campaigning for elections or raising campaign funds. In some countries, women candidates are supported by a vibrant civil society movement. In others, political appointments offer an alternate way of promoting women, as seen in the upper houses of the Bahamas, Senegal, Trinidad and Tobago and Lesotho, illustrating that the political will of leaders is an important factor in advancing women. There is no single solution, and progress results from a combination of national and international efforts to promote the participation of women in politics. ▀