
Gender-Based Quotas, Parity, and Elections:

An Empirical Study of the 2020 Legislative Municipal

Elections in the State of São Paulo, Brazil

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ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates the gender-based quota law for candidates in legislative elections in Brazil, identifying challenges and barriers to the ultimate goal of increasing female elected officials. Beyond analyzing the policymaking process and the obstacles to implementing quotas, the study presents a quantitative analysis based on the 2020 municipal legislative elections in the state of São Paulo. It explores key demographic differences between male and female candidates, such as race, education, and marital status, and assesses their impact on electoral success. The findings reveal that, for female candidates, characteristics like being white, well-educated, and married significantly increased their likelihood of being elected, more so than for their male counterparts. These results underscore the persistent cultural and institutional barriers that women face in Brazilian politics, aligning with existing literature on gender norms and political participation worldwide. The paper also provides policy recommendations to strengthen the enforcement of gender quotas, improve financial support for female candidates, and build institutional capacity to enhance women's political preparedness, aiming to foster long-term systemic change in Brazilian politics.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Political underrepresentation of women is a worldwide issue that goes beyond the search for equality. The lack of diversity in elected positions limits the extent to which severe social and economic problems are dealt with, particularly when it comes to race, ethnicity, and gender-related issues (Ballington and Karam 2005; Reingold, Haynie, and Widner 2021). The search for gender equity in politics became a mainstream topic in the past 25 years, with countries all over the world looking for better ways to reduce gender disparities in political representation (Caywood and Darmstadt 2024; Skorge 2023). Greater participation of women in politics has been shown to generate several positive effects for society in terms of social welfare and political accountability, resulting in more creative and effective policy solutions (Anzia and Berry 2011; Bolzendahl and Brooks 2007).

Brazil has implemented different initiatives for incentivizing more diverse representation in elected positions while dealing with a conservative society that still reinforces gender roles and norms of expected behaviors (Sacchet 2008). However, these reforms have seen limited success, with women still being vastly underrepresented. As of the 2022 elections, women hold only 17.3 percent of the 513 seats in the Chamber of Deputies and the Federal Senate and 18 percent of the 56,818 seats in municipal councils, in a country where women make up 52 percent of the population. These proportions have remained largely unchanged since the first policy addressing gender representation was implemented in 1995 (TSE Mulheres 2024). A key challenge has been the widespread use of *candidatas laranja*—fake female candidates registered by political parties to comply with quota requirements without genuinely supporting women’s electoral success (Gatto and Wylie 2022). This practice further weakens the impact of gender quotas and contributes to Brazil’s low ranking—136th out of 193 countries—in the percentage of women in national parliaments’ ranking (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2024).

As in most parts of the world, fundamental and equal rights for women in Brazil were obtained after long years of social mobilization. Women were allowed to vote in 1927 in the state of Rio Grande do Norte, the same state where the first female mayor Alzira Soriano (1897—1963) was elected in 1928 with 60 percent of the votes (Silva 2021). Four years later, together with the introduction of compulsory voting into the first Electoral Code in Brazil, women won the right to vote at the country level and the first female Federal Deputy, Carlota Pereira de Queiroz (1892—1982), was elected in 1933 (Marques 2019).

The main milestone for the women’s movement in Brazil was the Constitution of 1988, which allowed women to fully exercise their citizenship by including in the legal code the equality of rights and obligations among men and women (Torres and Carlos 2020). However, in terms of political representation, only 5

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percent of the 1988 Constituent Assembly was composed of female politicians (Sousa 2008). Since 1995, Brazil has relied on a gender-based quota law to increase female political representation in legislative elections. This law requires that 30 percent of the candidates at the party level must be female candidates, and that they must be awarded 30 percent of party funding and advertising time (Sacchet 2018; Câmara dos Deputados 2022). Unfortunately, almost 30 years later, female presence in Congress has increased only by 11 percentage points, suggesting that women's right to vote and be nominated for office is not necessarily synonymous with having effective political rights in Brazil (TSE 2024a).

This study examines the gender-based quota for candidates and identifies challenges and barriers to achieving the goal of increasing the number of female elected officials. More than just understanding the policymaking process and the challenges imposed on the implementation of the quotas, a quantitative analysis focusing on the results of the 2020 municipal legislative elections in the state of São Paulo is provided, and the main observable differences between male and female candidates and elected politicians are analyzed. This paper begins with a literature review that examines efforts to increase female participation in politics, the impact of gender-based quotas globally, the main barriers to achieving equitable representation of women in politics, and the current status of women in Brazilian politics. Following this, the research design is outlined, leading to an analysis of the results. The paper concludes with a summary of the main policy recommendations and final reflections.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

For more than 20 years, academics have been focusing on the importance of greater gender parity in politics and the effects of a fairer representation in terms of socioeconomic development and reducing gender bias (Dahlerup 2006; Goetz 2003; Krook 2009; Norris and Inglehart 2001; Bolzendahl and Brooks 2007). More equitable distribution of power has been observed to lead to a diversity of approaches and discourse, resulting in more creative and efficient policy solutions, with evidence that increased female leadership leads to more government spending on social welfare programs that improve medical care and all levels of education (OECD 2022; Women Deliver 2018; Inter-Parliamentary Union 2019).

While evidence from the United States demonstrates that female legislators have been observed to allocate more budgetary resources to their constituents than their male counterparts, suggesting a greater willingness to collaborate, female politicians still face higher standards of accountability and scrutiny globally (Anzia and Berry 2011; Desai, Karekurve-Ramachandra, and Montero 2024; Bauer 2020). This disparity is also seen in Brazil, where female mayors,

despite demonstrating lower levels of corruption compared to their male counterparts, receive fewer campaign donations and are less likely to be reelected, even when their tenures show positive results (Brollo and Troiano 2016). These findings suggest that, while women in politics may perform equally well or even outperform men in certain areas, gender biases continue to impact their political careers and the way they are perceived by voters and donors (Teele et al. 2018).

The persistent lack of gender parity in politics has been a focal point of research, with scholars frequently attributing it to a combination of cultural and institutional barriers (Norris and Inglehart 2001). In terms of cultural barriers, evidence suggests that women are constrained by the lack of necessary resources, social norms, and other barriers, such as family and house workload and responsibilities (Rana et al. 2024). Often discouraged from running for office by their families, friends, and communities, women also suffer due to the persistence of traditional gender roles dictating women's expected behavior (Lawless and Fox 2010; Anzia and Bernhard 2022; Rana et al. 2024).

The widespread global assumption that men are better suited to political life creates additional challenges. As an attempt of measuring voter taste, researchers conducted a study in India using computer-based Implicit Association Tests (IATs) to test gender–occupation stereotypes to compare how strong the association of male and female names with leadership and domestic tasks was, comparing exposure to female leaders through reserved political seats (Beaman et al. 2009). One of the main findings was that both men and women expressed an explicit distaste for female leaders, regardless of gender-based quota exposure. However, there was an observable improvement in voter perceptions of female leaders after gender-based quotas were established, which was followed by political gains for women (Beaman et al. 2009).

One study found that Brazilian voters were not specifically against electing women, when exploring the case of the election and reelection of ex-President Dilma Rousseff (2010 and 2014) (Araújo et al. 2018). Rather, it was the political elites and media who held Rousseff to a different standard than other male candidates (dos Santos and Wylie 2018; Magalhães and Lima 2023). While this interpretation suggests pervasive gender bias, it is not universally accepted. An alternative perspective is that Rousseff's election demonstrated progress in women's political representation, but the exploitation of her identity as a woman during the impeachment process exposed entrenched gendered double standards in Brazilian politics (Dos Santos and Jalalzai 2021).

When studying the advancement of female rights and women occupying positions of leadership and power, there is growing literature on the phenomenon of moral self-licensing (Ellen, Sexton, and Watkins 2024). This effect happens when a past moral action provides a hypothetical "license" for

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that individual to now behave in an immoral way (Blanken, Van De Ven, and Zeelenberg 2015). In the case of Rousseff, for example, one interpretation was that her election could be used as a “moral license” for citizens to be sexist, and even misogynistic, in their comments and arguments against her (Sosa 2019).

Institutional and political barriers are recognized as crucial challenges to the increase of gender parity in politics. In the case of Brazil, political parties play a vital role in the selection of candidates, and most of all, in determining where time and resources are allocated. Female candidates typically suffer from a lack of party support, including restricted access to political networks and connections, and are held to stricter standards about qualifications compared to men (Ballington and Karam 2005; Bauer 2020). The selection process for candidates is also perceived as an obstacle for women. With most parties having a decentralized process of self-selection, men usually benefit from being more likely to self-nominate for legislative positions (Araújo et al. 2018).

With respect to electoral systems, proportional representation has been shown to provide more opportunities for minority parties, as well as promote more diversity in representation (Salmond 2006). However, the design of the Brazilian electoral system further disincentivizes female political participation. When female candidates run for office, political parties often fail to provide them with sufficient support. Out of the 29 political parties in Brazil since 2023, only five had female directors, and women composed a majority of party affiliates in only two of them (Modelli 2018; TSE 2024b). Consequently, the selection of candidates tends to be biased in favor of men, and men have greater access to organizational support that grants them exposure to donors and voters (Niven 1998; Gatto and Wylie 2022; Butler and Preece 2016; Vallejo 2024). With unequal access to party-backed financial resources, female candidates in Brazil, and around the world, rely more heavily on personal fundraising efforts (Vallejo 2024).

Brazilian parties employ informal practices that directly affect women’s political representation in many ways. Gatto and Wylie (2022) suggest that the intentional nomination of fake candidates to simply comply with the current quota law without providing institutional support, as well as the extended use of provisional commissions to escape control on candidate selection, hurt female candidates. Araújo et al. (2018) point to the Brazilian candidate-centered electoral rules, the fragmentation of the party system, and decentralized nomination procedures within political parties as additional barriers to addressing women seeking election.

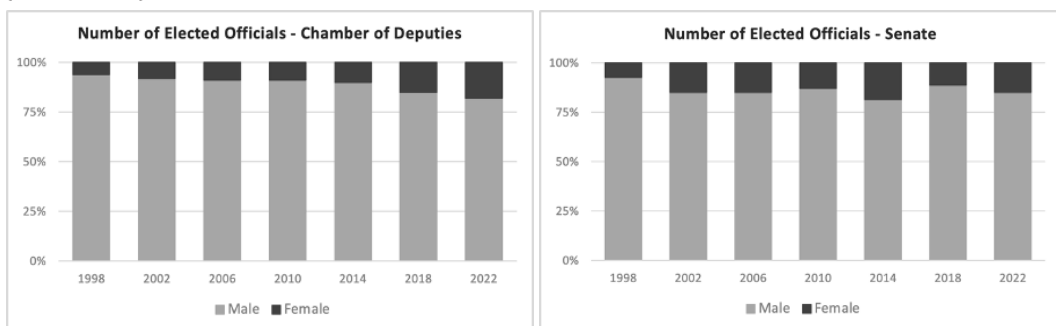
The high dependence on resources for electoral campaigns is identified as one of the most important barriers for female politicians in campaigns (Tavares 2022; ACE Project 2021). With more funding, it is believed that female candidates can overcome the disadvantages such as the lower number of incumbents—who

are more likely to be reelected and usually concentrate resource allocation—as well as gender biases (Speck and Mancuso 2014; Gatto and Thome 2020). Women also usually have less contact with private funders, and suffer financial hardship, and these factors have been identified as explaining why female candidates are unwilling to run again for office after being defeated (Araújo et al. 2018).

As an attempt to address gender imparity in politics, several countries have been adopting gender-based quotas, which are affirmative action measures designed to increase gender parity in political governing bodies and structures through equal representation (World Economic Forum 2019; ACE Project 2021; Morgenroth and Ryan 2018). Evidence suggests that gender-based quotas significantly reduce statistical discrimination over time in India, specifically in the long run after multiple elections since the policy implementation (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Beaman et al. 2009). In their study, Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) also found that in terms of the provision of local public goods in rural areas, female representatives were more responsive to women’s demands, which suggests that when populations are underrepresented, their interests are also less likely to be given priority in the public agenda.

With respect to the Brazilian implementation of gender-based quotas at the legislative level, it is widely acknowledged that it was an important milestone in the promotion of greater gender balance in the political arena, above all in terms of demonstrating the attention given to the importance of female political rights (Menuci and Nielsson 2019). Nonetheless, the pragmatic effects of the policy are still controversial. The main reason for this is that although political participation has indeed increased since 1995 and there are more elected female politicians than there were before, the rate of change is still much slower than expected, with some scholars pointing to an ineffective gender-based quota system (Neto et al. 2017; Sacchet 2018).

Figure 1: Share of Elected Officials for the Brazilian National Congress per Gender and Chamber (1994-2022)



Source: Author’s own computation based on data from TSE 2024a

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The number of female candidates for the Brazilian Congress has increased since 1994 more significantly in the Chamber of Deputies than in the Federal Senate. However, there was also an increase in the number of male candidates for Congress. Simultaneously, we can see in Figure 1 that the share of female elected politicians increased moderately in both chambers over time, at a much lower rate than the number of candidacies. It is important to highlight that since Brazil has a system of proportional representation for legislative positions, most deputies depend on electoral “quotients” to be elected, and only a few of them are directly elected by the number of votes received, indicating a critical dependence on the party structure and party leadership decision (TSE 2022).

2.1 Gender-based quotas in Brazilian politics

In 1995, Brazil implemented its first “Law of Quotas” (Lei 9.100/95), an affirmative action that was designed to increase female political participation in the upcoming election in 1996, and it was initially restricted to municipal chambers (Sá and Santos 2019). Proposed by the former Federal Deputy Marta Suplicy from the Labor Party (PT), the sanctioned law reserved 20 percent of legislative municipal candidacies for women, which was 10 percentage points lower than the initial proposal (Sá and Santos 2019). Two years later, in 1997, the “Law of Elections” widened the scope of the previous law, including state assemblies and the Chamber of Deputies, and increased from 20 to 30 percent the minimum share of candidates of the same sex (Teodoro 2020). However, both laws defined the share over the total number of possible candidacies from a party or coalition and not over the total number of candidates formally registered (de Melo 2018). This calculation was problematic because parties were allowed to register 120 percent of the available electoral seats in their lists in 1996 and 150 percent in 1998, so if they decided to register fewer candidates, the quotas would not prevent them from having a greater share of male candidates, as they just could not exceed 80 percent (or 70 percent after 1997) of the total potential candidacies (Araújo 2001).

It was only in 2009, 14 years after the first proposal of gender-based quotas, that the Brazilian Congress proposed new legislation, correcting the existing policy. Substituting the concept of “fulfillment” for “reservation,” the Political Parties’ Law (Law 12.034/2009) instituted the designation of at least 30 percent of all candidates per party and coalition for women in proportional elections for legislative elections in all administrative levels, including the Federal Senate (Federal Senate of Brazil 2009). Moreover, this legislation regulated female gender and not biological sex, being inclusive and fostering diversity, while also defining the allocation of at least 10 percent of campaign advertising for women, as well as 5 percent of the federal party fund for promoting and incentivizing female political participation (Neto et al. 2017, 80).

With a moderate increase in the number of female candidates, but almost

no effects on actual elected positions, the “Political Reform of 2015” (Lei 13.165/15) redefined once again gender-based quotas in Brazil (Neto et al. 2017). Designed to address the ongoing problem of underrepresentation in terms of elected positions, in terms of party sponsorship and access to funds, and after accusations of fake female candidates, the new legislation ended up institutionalizing gender inequality in Brazilian politics (Teodoro 2020). These fake (or sometimes called phantom candidates) are likely the ones who receive less than 1 percent of the votes compared to the elected candidate that received the least amount of votes per state (Gatto and Wylie 2022). Female candidates in such cases are usually treated as placeholders for parties to be able to fulfill the electoral requirements without actually investing in those candidates.

By inappropriately defining that at least 30 percent of women would have access to at most 15 percent of the resources of the federal party fund, the legislation was corrected and judged unconstitutional in 2018, guaranteeing that all female candidates should receive at least 30 percent of funding, as well as 30 percent of electoral advertisement time (Teodoro 2020; Câmara dos Deputados 2022). The 2015 law also adjusted for the fact that coalitions for proportional elections were no longer allowed starting in 2020, in which 30 percent of candidates now at the party level should be female.

By evaluating the current scenario, in which women still occupy only 17.7 percent of seats between the Chamber of Deputies and the Federal Senate and 18 percent of municipal councils, multiple hypotheses about the apparent lack of effectiveness of gender-based quotas in Brazilian elections arise (TSE Mulheres 2024; Sacchet 2018). The way the policy was implemented with the gradual adjustments to its prerogatives, the low share of fulfilled candidacy quota (only 30 percent), as well as the misconduct of political parties to find alternatives to complying with the quota are perceived to be the main causes for why the observed results are still modest in comparison to other countries where quotas were implemented with political motivation and law enforcement (Bona and May 2019; Sacchet 2018).

Given the current context in Brazil, the lack of accountability and enforcement of the law is also placed at the center of the debate, bringing attention to the Superior Electoral Court, which is responsible for guaranteeing that parties have been complying with the quotas (Diniz 2024). As the highest body of electoral justice, the institution played a key role in contributing to the institutionalization of political incentives for female candidates. Nevertheless, the effective implementation of gender-based quotas depends heavily on the commitment and credibility of the institution to supervise and punish parties that do not comply with the legislation (Silva et al. 2017; Âmbito Jurídico 2014).

The Superior Electoral Court behaves as a counterbalance for the centralized power of political parties, which are mostly controlled by male politicians with

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traditionally conservative views on gender inclusion, regardless of political ideology. Ramos and Silva (2020) have concluded that the Brazilian Superior Electoral Court usually fosters female political participation, but primarily in low-stakes, straightforward cases, while maintaining a more cautious and restrained approach in cases considered both complex and high-stakes.

As mentioned previously, cultural and institutional barriers can also prevent gender-based quotas from increasing actual gender parity in elected positions, since the scrutiny and gender norms still apply to the assessment of candidates, leading to statistical discrimination against women. The new electoral financing law update, restricting donations from companies to only private individuals since 2015, also adds additional barriers since candidates now rely more heavily on the party and personal funds (Vallejo 2024; FGV Direito 2020).

One of the most important aspects of the gender-based quotas in Brazil is the downside effect of the rise of fake candidacies, which harms trust of and fosters political gender bias toward female candidates. With a calculated average share of 35 to 50 percent of phantom candidates per congressional election, party misconduct keeps helping male politicians maintain structures of power within patriarchal party structures (Pinheiro and Acayaba 2019; BBC News Brasil 2019). This practice can be considered an indirect form of elite capture — a process in which privileged groups manipulate policies and institutions to maintain their dominance . Interestingly, the presence of potential fake candidates is a cross-party issue, in which ex-President Jair Bolsonaro's party during the 2018 election (PSL) had approximately 16 percent phantom candidates, while the leftist Lula's party (PT), his biggest political opponent, had 11 percent (Gatto and Wylie 2022; BBC News Brasil 2019).

Finally, a new variable affected the electoral campaign dispute in 2020: the COVID-19 pandemic. As analyzed by Gatto and Thome (2020), fundraising and reaching out for individual donations became an even more complex task due to restrictions and social distancing, which was particularly more relevant for women since, in Brazil, women were more compliant with health protocols than men (Galasso et al. 2020; Villela et al. 2021).

2.2. Civil society and movements for female political rights and participation

Across the literature available on gender bias and underrepresentation of women in politics, commonalities exist that emphasize an important virtue embodied by female leaders and politicians all over the world: resilience (Eagly and Carli 2008). In the case of Brazil, Araújo et al. (2018) explore the formation and importance of the women's caucus (bancada feminina) in the National Congress. The authors also point out that female officials are more likely to be involved in pro-equality policies, and have raised important issues reassessing initiatives that perpetuate gender bias and reinforce traditional

gender roles such as workplace equality, gender-based violence, and social policies. Similarly, Gatto and Thome (2020) focus on the resilience of female candidates when deciding to run for office during such uncertain times as the 2020 municipal elections, even with more obstacles than they would normally face. However, they emphasize the positive and optimistic approach of the candidates when adjusting campaign strategies, arguing that women's underrepresentation cannot and must not be explained by a lack of personal interest or ambition.

During every election period in Brazil, new initiatives arise with the purpose of fostering female political participation and preparing candidates for the campaigns. Those initiatives are usually supra-partisan, supporting candidates from all political affiliations, and are designed to address the issue through different approaches. Organizations such as Vamos Juntas and Elas no Poder provide mentoring, workshops, and guidance for female candidates to help them have more competitive electoral platforms, plan their campaigns, learn how to fundraise and bargain with party leaders, allocate resources, and navigate through the electoral process (Universa 2020). Other platforms, such as Vote Nelas, raised awareness of the importance of having higher female political participation, provided information and space to promote female candidacies during elections, and communicated achievements during their mandates (Barbieri et al. 2019).

The Superior Electoral Court has also been an important actor in promoting communication campaigns about the issue of female political representation (TSE 2021a). Successful awareness campaigns can help minimize gender bias and help candidates overcome the cultural and institutional barriers that affect both their chances of entering the political sphere as well as their chances of being elected.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

Measuring sources of bias against women in a society is a complex task. Some studies have been designed to isolate the effect of gender discrimination in elections, such as randomizing the order in which candidate names appear on ballots, among other methods (Eymeoud and Vertier 2020; Koppell and Steen 2004). However, it is hard to evaluate gender bias when so many other factors might also affect constituents' decisions. For this reason, the purpose of this study is not to draw a causal inference of gender bias on electoral results, but to provide a quantitative descriptive analysis of the 2020 municipal legislative elections in the state of São Paulo, Brazil. The objective is to examine the observable gender-based differences between candidates and elected officials and to analyze how they relate to the cultural and institutional barriers researchers identify as obstacles for female politicians.

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First, it is important to understand how legislative municipal elections work in Brazil. Local elections take place every four years, almost never overlapping with national and state elections, and voters simultaneously choose local legislative representatives and mayors (Tarouco 2021). Municipal legislative politicians are elected through a proportional representation system with open lists, and voting is compulsory for adults 18 years old or older (TSE 2021). The number of councilors elected varies depending on the municipality's population, ranging from 9 to 55 councilors.

According to the Superior Electoral Court, councilors are elected if their party achieves the electoral quotient, which is defined by the number of valid votes divided by the number of seats in the local chamber. The number of candidates per party is then defined by the total number of votes received by the party divided by the electoral quotient. Nevertheless, councilors need to achieve at least 10 percent of the electoral quotient to be selected by their parties (TSE 2024c). As of the most recent update to the Brazilian gender-based quota law in 2018, female politicians should compose 30 percent of each party's candidate list and should be allocated 30 percent of both funding and electoral advertisement time (Teodoro 2020; Câmara dos Deputados 2022).

The state of São Paulo is the most populous state in Brazil, with 44,420,459 inhabitants across 645 municipalities, electing around 7,000 councilors per municipal election (G1 2023; TSE 2024a). The state of São Paulo was chosen for this analysis due to this high number of candidates and elected officials. It is also important to acknowledge that the demographic composition and socio-economic conditions of the state might be very different from the rest of the country, also affecting gender norms and the diversity of political representation. In the Efficiency Rank from the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* (Ranking de Eficiência dos Estados da Folha), São Paulo ranks first in terms of education and infrastructure and has the highest gross domestic product (GDP) among all states (Folha 2021). Nonetheless, gender inequity in politics is still a reality in São Paulo, where only 16 percent of all local councilors elected in 2020 were female politicians (TRE-SP 2020).

The data used to perform the quantitative analysis were extracted from the Superior Electoral Court website, where all electoral results and information on candidates have been made available for every election since 1945 (TSE 2024a). This analysis was restricted to legislative candidates in the election of November 2020, combining five datasets: data on candidates, campaign funding, campaign expenses, voters, and electoral results. All datasets were structured at the individual candidate level with a unique identifier code, except for the data on voters, which were organized at the municipal level. Candidates with missing information on campaign funding were attributed the average funding per city, conditional on gender and position (whether the candidate was running for mayor or local council). After this transformation, due to the wide range

of funding values, “Inverse Hyperbolic Sine” (IHS) transformation was used to get the log of the value of funding—bringing numbers closer together and keeping the proportions—while dealing with potential zero-values (although there were no negative values). Finally, races without the final results or that were run again the following year due to electoral issues were excluded from the quantitative analysis.

This analysis has three main objectives. The first is to identify the main observable differences between male and female legislative candidates. The second is to identify the observable differences between male and female elected local councilors. The third objective is to define two regression models to describe the relationship between demographics, political orientation, sources of funding, campaign expenses, and outcome variables both on the share of votes received per candidate and the likelihood of being elected. For the second dependent variable, a binomial logistic regression (logit) was used considering the binary nature of the variable—either being elected (1) or not (0). Hence, the predicted proportion relates to the logistic model of the natural log (ln) of $\ln \frac{P}{(1 - P)} = \beta X_i$ where P_i is the probability of being elected (Goyanes and Lavin 2018; Sperandei 2014).

4. ANALYSIS

On November 15th, 2020, around 7,000 councilors were elected in the Municipal Legislative Elections in the state of São Paulo, out of over 84,000 candidates (TSE 2024a). At the candidate level, women represented 34.5 percent of all candidates, a share just above the minimum of 30 percent according to the gender-based quota law, and the city with the highest share of female candidates was União Paulista, with 51.28 percent of candidates being women. Nevertheless, the state only elected 1,055 female councilors, corresponding to 16 percent of the available seats (TRE-SP 2020).

Across all municipalities, nearly 70 percent of candidates were white politicians, only 26.6 percent had a college degree, and about 55 percent were affiliated with right-wing parties. The most disputed election was in the city of São Paulo, the capital of the state, with almost 9,000,000 registered voters, in which for each of the 55 seats there were about 34 candidates, while the least disputed election was São João das Duas Pontes, with approximately 2,300 voters, and for each of the 9 seats there were about 2 candidates.

From the big picture and summary statistics, we might underestimate the actual differences within groups of candidates. To focus specifically on the observable differences between male and female candidates and elected officials, we will use the difference in means’ p-value for the difference to indicate statistical significance. The analysis is made with a significance level of 5 percent, meaning that significantly different categories have a p-value smaller than

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0.05. Additionally, there are cases in which the magnitude of the difference in means, although statistically significant, might not be expressive. This means that although we can confidently reject the hypothesis of no difference in means between female and male results of certain categories, the actual difference is very small. For the purpose of the analysis, we will focus on the differences when both cases are true: statistical significance and magnitude.

4.1. Differences at the candidate level

Table 1: Observable differences between male and female legislative candidates

Categories	Male	Female	Difference	p.value
Age	47.086	46.170	0.916	0.000
White	0.675	0.708	-0.032	0.000
Married/Widowed	0.594	0.443	0.152	0.000
Higher Education	0.293	0.354	-0.061	0.000
Capital	0.023	0.022	0.001	0.171
Large City	0.348	0.330	0.018	0.000
Medium City	0.333	0.329	0.004	0.281
Small City	0.319	0.341	-0.021	0.000
Center	0.235	0.234	0.001	0.840
Left	0.205	0.211	-0.006	0.056
Right	0.560	0.555	0.005	0.164
Total Voters City	321639.070	302121.935	19517.135	0.043
Log Funding	7.922	7.823	0.100	0.000
Main Source: Donation	0.152	0.108	0.044	0.000
Main Source: Personal	0.203	0.119	0.084	0.000
Main Source: Political	0.384	0.469	-0.085	0.000
Elected	0.107	0.038	0.069	0.000

Source: Author's own computation based on electoral data from the TSE 2024a

At the candidate level, there are multiple statistically significant differences between male and female politicians. Female candidates in the state of São Paulo were slightly more white than male candidates, a difference of 3 percentage points, and the share of married female candidates was smaller, where almost 60 percent of the male candidates were married, as compared to only 44 percent of women. This difference might be explained by the cultural barriers previously analyzed, in which female politicians usually face more resistance from family members and friends when entering the political arena, and, therefore, are more likely to be unmarried when running for office, which is similar to available evidence from other countries (Gruneau 2021; Hannah Maruci, quoted in Iory 2025). For women, there was a higher share of candidates with higher education, 6 percentage points higher than for men. In the next section, we will focus on how much this difference increases when it comes to elected officials.

Women were also more likely to have political resources as their main source of funding (47 percent), while men depended more on personal funds and

donations. Again, this difference is aligned with what was expected, since—especially during COVID-19—women faced more barriers to obtaining financial support, and earn, on average, 30 percent less than men in Brazil (Borgen Project 2021). Interestingly, there was no significant difference in terms of the magnitude of funding between men and women on average. Nevertheless, the difference is statistically significantly smaller for women and the variance in terms of funding was much bigger for male candidates, indicating that the actual difference might be underestimated by using the average value. Most importantly, female candidates were also statistically less likely to be elected than male candidates—as expected given all the elements explored above.

4.2. Differences at the elected councilor level

Table 2: Observable differences between male and female elected councilors

Categories	Male	Female	Difference	p.value
Age	45.508	45.951	-0.443	0.208
White	0.766	0.829	-0.063	0.000
Married/Widowed	0.657	0.558	0.099	0.000
Higher Education	0.394	0.593	-0.199	0.000
Capital	0.007	0.012	-0.005	0.169
Large City	0.175	0.146	0.029	0.015
Medium City	0.272	0.273	-0.001	0.956
Small City	0.553	0.581	-0.028	0.088
Center	0.304	0.308	-0.005	0.766
Left	0.155	0.169	-0.013	0.285
Right	0.541	0.523	0.018	0.284
Total Voters City	125542.781	158323.684	-32780.903	0.298
Log Funding	8.350	8.271	0.079	0.153
Main Source: Donation	0.319	0.316	0.004	0.820
Main Source: Personal	0.340	0.252	0.088	0.000
Main Source: Political	0.252	0.356	-0.103	0.000
Sum of Votes	477.458	431.072	46.386	0.001
Share of Votes	0.025	0.026	-0.001	0.078
Funding per Vote	46.010	50.648	-4.638	0.816

Source: Author's own computation based on electoral data from the TSE 2024a

Going further with the analysis, we can now observe the actual differences, on average, between elected male and female councilors in the state of São Paulo in 2020. Focusing on the variables that are both statistically significant and impressive in terms of magnitude, some of the differences are large and suggest a possible overlap between gender discrimination and other sources of bias. As observed in Table 2, almost 83 percent of all elected female councilors were white, a number that is not only different from the share of white male councilors (76.6 percent), but also higher than the observed share of white female candidates (70.8 percent). This pattern might suggest that women of color face greater barriers to election compared to white women, possibly because gender discrimination is compounded by racial bias (UN Women 2021b).

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As observed at the candidate level, elected female politicians were still less likely to be married than men, but there was a difference in terms of magnitude. A higher share of both male and female elected officials was married, but the share for women rose significantly more than for men (11.5 percentage points versus 6.3). One hypothesis is that to be considered credible and respectful, candidates who are married might have higher chances of being elected by constituents, potentially regardless of gender. If this is true, this represents a direct and important barrier for female politicians as they are less likely to be married when they enter the political arena.

Another significant difference that was exacerbated among elected officials was the share of politicians with higher education. While 39.4 percent of male councilors had at least a college degree, 59.3 percent of female elected councilors had higher education, a difference of almost 20 percentage points as compared to the 6 percentage points at the candidate level. This suggests that, possibly due to the cultural and institutional barriers previously described, female candidates are more competitive when they seem to be better educated and prepared for the job, thus appearing to be more likely to be elected by constituents in this specific election. This finding might indicate the double standard that constituents have when evaluating female and male politicians, both during an election and once in office, as suggested by Anzia and Berry (2011) and by Bauer (2020). Moreover, it points toward a potential selection bias in politics, in which women have to be better educated than men to run for office.

As noted in previous research, female councilors did depend more substantially on political funding (35.6 percent), while male councilors depended more on their personal resources (34 percent). Finally, although women have received statistically fewer votes than men, they had a similar share of votes when considering the number of voters per city, a difference that was not statistically significant.

4.3. Regression Models

The third objective of this analysis is to identify which demographic and political variables were associated with the outcomes of interest: the share of votes received and the likelihood of being elected. As mentioned previously, the regression models provide a description of the 2020 electoral results in the state of São Paulo. With such a complete database, there are multiple interesting factors to be analyzed from the 2020 election, but to maintain the focus on gender differences, we will only evaluate some of the variables.

Table 3: Regression results

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Share of Votes	Elected
	<i>OLS</i>	<i>logistic</i>
Female	−0.002*** (0.0002)	−1.275*** (0.121)
Age	−0.0001*** (0.00000)	−0.016*** (0.001)
Small City	0.008*** (0.0001)	0.452*** (0.040)
Large City	−0.003*** (0.0001)	−0.451*** (0.043)
White	0.001*** (0.0001)	0.245*** (0.042)
Married	0.001*** (0.0001)	0.348*** (0.039)
Higher Education	0.001*** (0.0001)	0.419*** (0.038)
Main Source: Political	0.0002 (0.001)	−0.529** (0.247)
Main Source: Personal	0.002** (0.001)	0.073 (0.245)
Main Source: Donation	0.002*** (0.001)	0.510** (0.245)
Left	−0.001*** (0.0001)	−0.332*** (0.049)
Right	−0.001*** (0.0001)	−0.213*** (0.038)
Expenses (per possible voter)	0.022*** (0.0004)	3.302*** (0.131)
Female*Expenses	−0.016*** (0.001)	−1.899*** (0.175)
Female*White	−0.001*** (0.0002)	0.315*** (0.110)
Female*Married	0.00002 (0.0002)	0.032 (0.086)
Female*Higher Education	0.002*** (0.0002)	0.476*** (0.086)
Constant	0.005*** (0.001)	−1.550*** (0.259)
Observations	36,118	36,118
R ²	0.374	
Adjusted R ²	0.374	
Log Likelihood		−12,741.110
Akaike Inf. Crit.		25,518.230
Residual Std. Error	0.009 (df = 36100)	
F Statistic	1,269.467*** (df = 17; 36100)	

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Source: Author's own computation based on electoral data from the TSE 2024a

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For the logit model (second column in Table 3), negative coefficients indicate that such a profile was less likely to be elected than the reference profile (e.g. educated versus non-educated), so the fitted probability is therefore below 50 percent. As observed in Table 3, women received a smaller share of votes than men. Being a female candidate was associated with a negative coefficient, indicating that women were less likely to be elected, all else equal ($p = 21.9\%$; $\beta = -1.275$; Odds = 0.28). This estimate is statistically significant at a 5 percent significance level. Focusing on the interaction between gender and other variables, it can also be observed that white female candidates were 57.8 percent more likely to be elected than men ($\beta = 0.315$; Odds = 1.37), and that female candidates with higher education were 61.7 percent ($\beta = 0.476$; Odds = 1.61) more likely to win than men, an effect that is aligned with previous research. Furthermore, it is interesting to observe that higher expenses per possible voter were associated with higher shares of the vote and higher log odds of being elected, and both findings were statistically significant. However, the interaction between expenses and gender indicated a negative effect. This might suggest that the effect of spending more per voter is greater for men than for women, another potential barrier for female candidates.

5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing the persistent underrepresentation of women in Brazilian politics requires a multifaceted approach that tackles cultural, institutional, political, and structural barriers, as well as applying an intersectional perspective. Based on the analysis and findings of this study—both in understanding the implementation of the current gender-based quota law and identifying the challenges faced by female candidates—the following three main policy recommendations are proposed. While these measures are designed to promote equitable political participation, foster accountability, and mitigate systemic biases, it is crucial to acknowledge that no single set of policies can resolve all underlying issues. Achieving meaningful and lasting change will require sustained political prioritization, momentum, and commitment over time to reshape the structural dynamics of representation in Brazil.

1. Strengthen Enforcement of Gender-Based Quotas and Combat Fake Candidacies

To address party misconduct and ensure genuine compliance with gender-based quotas, more robust enforcement mechanisms are necessary. The Superior Electoral Court (TSE) could adopt a more assertive role by implementing periodic and randomized audits of party candidate lists, ensuring adherence to quota requirements and the authenticity of female candidacies. Stricter penalties for non-compliance, such as reductions in public funding, disqualification of non-compliant candidate lists, or restrictions on future party registration,

could be enforced (Ramos and Silva 2020; Diniz 2024). Additionally, TSE could incentivize political parties to proactively reach and prepare female candidates by introducing incentives that encourage best practices. For example, parties that consistently meet or exceed gender quotas could be granted additional public funds, access to training programs, or advertising opportunities.

Targeted measures to detect and prevent fake candidacies are crucial. For example, partnerships with civil society organizations could help monitor candidate profiles and report irregularities, enhancing transparency and accountability. These collaborations, combined with improved enforcement, could mitigate the prevalence of phantom candidates, which erode public trust and reinforce patriarchal power structures within political parties (Pinheiro and Acayaba 2019).

2. Guarantee Equitable Allocation of Financial Resources

Political financing continues to be a significant barrier for female candidates, particularly following the 2015 prohibition of corporate donations, which has increased candidates' reliance on party and personal funds (Vallejo 2024; Sacchet 2018). The law already mandates that at least 30 percent of public campaign funds be allocated to female candidates; however, rigorous oversight mechanisms are essential to ensure proper enforcement and equitable distribution. Strengthening monitoring and accountability measures would help prevent parties from mismanaging or diverting these resources, ensuring that female candidates receive the financial support necessary to compete effectively.

However, as Sacchet (2018) highlights, the concentration of decision-making power within party leadership often results in unequal distribution of resources, even when quotas are mandated. To address this, there could be publicly funded grants specifically targeting female candidates with limited personal funds. Such grants could alleviate financial disparities stemming from structural inequities like lower average wages and restricted fundraising networks (Borgen Project 2021; Vallejo 2024). Furthermore, independent auditing bodies could monitor the allocation and use of campaign funds to minimize party manipulation and ensure that financial support reaches the intended candidates.

3. Build Institutional Capacity and Leverage Technology to Support Female Politicians

Addressing the disparities in political preparedness between male and female candidates requires a two-pronged approach: capacity-building and technological empowerment. Mentorship and training programs, developed through partnerships between the Superior Electoral Court (TSE), NGOs, and academic institutions, could focus on equipping female candidates with practical skills in campaign management, fundraising strategies, voter engagement, and

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effective communication. These programs could also incorporate training on the use of digital platforms for these mechanisms, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the importance of digital tools for political participation (Barbieri et al. 2019; Gatto and Thome 2020).

To institutionalize advocacy for gender parity, gender representation councils at federal and state levels could be established. These councils could monitor the implementation and impact of gender-inclusive policies while acting as intermediaries between civil society and government, ensuring female politicians' perspectives and needs are represented. Additionally, regulations must be strengthened to combat online gender harassment, which disproportionately affects women in politics, fostering a safer and more inclusive digital environment for their participation (UN Women 2021a; Beck, Alcaraz, and Rodríguez 2022).

6. CONCLUSION

Female underrepresentation in Brazilian politics is a chronic issue that has persisted even after the first attempt to increase female political participation through gender-based quotas in 1995 (Teodoro 2020). Despite the increase in candidacies, women still face cultural, political, and institutional barriers to actually being elected, with parties playing a crucial role in maintaining the status quo and the centralization of power by male elected officials (Araújo et al. 2018). The pandemic of COVID-19, in addition to killing millions of people worldwide, introduced new barriers to female politicians when running for office, most of all when related to campaigning and fundraising (Gatto and Thome 2020).

Using a descriptive quantitative analysis of the 2020 municipal legislative elections in the state of São Paulo, we saw how these barriers reflect demographic and political differences between candidates and elected councilors, as well as the share of votes received by candidates and their likelihood of being elected. Nevertheless, female politicians are increasingly being supported by social movements and public awareness campaigns that provide resources to give them more competitive electoral platforms to try to overcome these barriers, and despite losing, female politicians in Brazil and around the world still show resilience and persistence.

Increasing female participation in politics and raising awareness of the benefits that could result from addressing the gender gap in elected positions requires political motivation and civic engagement. As noted here, parties are also responsible for the current gender imbalance, so it is important to highlight the role of civic participation and organizations to advocate in favor of lowering gender bias and holding parties and politicians accountable for their actions. For this reason, the Brazilian Superior Electoral Court must recognize its role in

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