

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ARTICLE

All Politics Is Local: Studying Women's Representation in Local Politics in Authoritarian Regimes

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The past decade has witnessed a significant increase in women's presence in local politics. According to the newly published United Nations (UN) Women in Local Government data set, women constitute 36% of local deliberative bodies worldwide compared to merely 25% in national parliaments.¹ Much of this increase is the result of gender quotas: the Gender Quotas Database (International IDEA 2022) shows that as of 2021, 75 countries had some form of gender quota on the local level, 24 of which were authoritarian regimes. Yet, extant work on gender politics in authoritarian regimes tends to focus on the national level, given the highly centralized decision-making processes in such contexts. We contend that the study of women's engagement and representation in local politics can help scholars better understand not only gender and politics, but also authoritarian politics more generally.

Why Go Local?

In theory, local governance should shift power from the central government to local politicians and institutions. Because of their physical proximity to their constituents, local officials should be more accessible to reach, to monitor, and to have greater knowledge about the problems and concerns of their locales (Choudhry and Stacey 2014). Citizens often lack knowledge of formal politics, yet most citizens have some awareness of and experience with governance in their interactions with the bureaucrats and officials who enforce the law, manage local infrastructure such as road construction and maintenance, and ensure the provision of services like running water, electricity, and trash collection. This is particularly true for women who tend to be more involved

in community-oriented and local issues (Coffé 2013). Shifting focus to the local level offers an opportunity to examine a site of politics where ordinary citizens interact extensively with officials to shape outcomes even in authoritarian contexts, and where women frequently engage in politics.

Moreover, paying closer attention to women as representatives in local politics in nondemocracies will advance our understanding of gender and autocratic politics. There are significant within- and cross-country variations in women's local representation that remain unexplored in nondemocracies. For instance, women's local representation in the Russian regions fluctuates between 10% and 25% (Vishevsky 2021). Women constitute 31% of Uganda's national parliament but 46% of local seats; in Cuba, in contrast, women constitute 53% of the national parliament but hold only 35% of local seats.² Furthermore, in some autocracies, women are only elected to local councils because of the absence of an elected national legislature (e.g., Saudi Arabia and Qatar until 2021) or its suspension as a result of ongoing conflict (e.g., Palestine since 2006).

Importantly, existing work from democracies has demonstrated that the nature and consequences of women's representation may be different at the local level compared with the national level (Pini 2013; Sanbonmatsu 2002; Sundström and Stockemer 2015). For example, Ruf (2021) shows that the share of women on party tickets at the local level in Germany results from parties' regional-level nonquota strategies for recruiting women, which vary within parties. Other studies of democratic contexts explore how electoral institutions (e.g., Pereira 2021; Trounstein and Valdini 2008), ideology (e.g., Santana and Aguilar 2019), party strategy and recruitment (e.g., Wylie and dos Santos 2016), and social networks (e.g., Dewi 2014) affect patterns of women's representation at the local and regional level within countries.

To date, we lack well-developed theories of how these dynamics play out in authoritarian regimes. It does seem clear, however, that local politics in autocracies have distinct features, such as the concentration of power in the hands of the regime and its close allies, the fragmentation or weak presence of nonregime and opposition parties in local politics, and the predominance of local client politics. An emerging literature on authoritarian contexts has uncovered important within-case variations across different levels and units of governance in regard to voters' evaluations of women in local office (Avdeyeva and Matland 2021) as well as in how political parties' organizational capacities (Belschner 2022) and strategies (Clark, Blackman, and Sasmaz 2022; Marschall and Shalaby 2021) affect female representation. All these factors mean that how gender intersects with political representation at the local level is not likely to be merely a small-scale reenactment of what these dynamics look like at the national level.

Going Local: New Opportunities for Gender Politics and Authoritarianism Research

Studying women's representation at the local level can provide invaluable insights into the study of authoritarian politics. Examining parties' behavior

and strategies regarding female recruitment and nomination in local politics can enrich our understanding of how parties perform their role in local politics in relation to their existing ties with the incumbent autocrat. Barnett and Shalaby's (2021) study of women's electoral success in Morocco's municipal elections highlights, for example, that municipalities with tighter clientelist linkages to the regime were less likely to have women elected beyond the mandated gender quota. They argue that this outcome reflects voters' perceptions that women are less likely to be capable clientelist service providers, and anticipation that their poor performance would undermine parties' role as intermediaries between the regime and local publics. An investigation of local-level female representation thus provides new evidence as to how political parties understand their role in the authoritarian political system, especially as it relates to regime survival and stability. Their finding also contrasts with Aili Mari Tripp's (2023) argument in this Critical Perspectives section that, cross-nationally, greater regime entrenchment and institutionalization are associated with increased representation of women. Investigating voter behavior and preferences vis-à-vis female candidates at the local level would also help us better understand the benefits—whether clientelistic or programmatic—that citizens anticipate from interacting with local political institutions and parties in authoritarian regimes (and whether they think female representation will enhance or undermine those benefits).

Furthermore, scrutinizing the adoption and implementation of local gender quotas in autocracies may provide scholars with important information on the dynamics of autocratic rule. As maintained by Sarah Sunn Bush and Pär Zetterberg (2023) in the introduction to this Critical Perspectives series, autocrats often adopt gender equality policies to appeal to international actors and bolster their international reputation. Introducing national-level quota policies is particularly beneficial for the regime as they signal modernity and reform. However, these motivations may not fully explain autocrats' decisions to adopt local gender quotas that tend to be less visible. Surveying public opinion toward regime-mandated gender reforms such as local gender quotas may also shed important light on regimes' local bases of support in autocracies. As maintained by Yuree Noh (2023) in this section, it is imperative to consider how citizens' disposition toward the regime may shape their support for or opposition to gender reforms.

Methodologically, analyzing gender and political representation at the local level provides authoritarianism scholars opportunities to conduct novel research, ranging from in-depth qualitative studies to large-*n* quantitative research. For qualitative scholars, the adoption and implementation of gender quotas create many new potential sites for in-depth ethnographic or interview-based research. The study of lower-level governing units also allows researchers to “increase the *n*” (Snyder 2001) and leverage research designs that rely for inference on comparisons of many comparable units that vary in systematic ways—for example, by the type of electoral system or gender quota in place. In their work examining the determinants of women's success beyond gender quotas in local elections, Barnett and Shalaby (2021) compare performance in the single-member district versus proportional representation electoral systems

across Morocco's municipalities. However, researchers should carefully consider in their analyses how the phenomena they care about may operate distinctly not only at the local versus national level but also across local-level units.

Finally, new data collection efforts can make a substantial contribution by expanding the coverage, granularity, and comparability of local-level data. Recent efforts that have prioritized standardized and systematic data collection on women in local governments are a valuable first step (Berevoescu and Ballington 2021), but these efforts have so far focused mostly on democracies. Researchers working in authoritarian contexts could advance the field by joining efforts to collect original data on female candidates and winners, explore the dynamics of citizens' support of local- versus national-level gender quotas, and expand available data on the socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of lower-level governing units (such as female labor force participation rates). Furthermore, both qualitative and quantitative information on the strategies of political parties' nomination and selection of female candidates in local politics is much needed to better understand variations in women's political representation across different levels of governance.

Conclusion

The study of gender and politics in authoritarian regimes should pay closer attention to local politics. Attention to the local level offers opportunities for scholars to better understand gender politics in nondemocracies and how authoritarianism works. The proliferation of subnational gender quotas in authoritarian regimes in recent years makes the study of female representation at the local level under autocracy newly relevant and feasible in qualitative or quantitative investigations of gender and political representation. Considering why local gender quotas are adopted, local party strategies, and the attitudes and behavior of voters toward quotas and local female representatives can illuminate regime logics, party functions, and the expectations and behaviors of individual citizens living in authoritarian political systems. This is an area ripe for significant theoretical and empirical contributions.

Notes

1. In this piece, we rely on UN Women's definition of local government as "institutional units whose fiscal, legislative and executive authority extends over the smallest geographical areas distinguished for administrative and political purposes." See Sustainable Development Goal indicator 5.5.1b, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata/files/Metadata-05-05-01b.pdf>.
2. National parliament data from International IDEA (2022); local representation data from Berevoescu and Ballington (2021).

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