

# Gender Quotas and International Reputation

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**Abstract:** *The global spread of electoral gender quotas has been characterized as one of the most significant institutional developments of the last 30 years. Many of the countries that have adopted these laws designed to increase women's political representation are electoral autocracies that have otherwise-stark gender inequalities. Some scholars argue that electoral authoritarian states have adopted quotas as a strategy for improving their international reputations for democracy. This article represents the first exploration of whether quotas really generate reputational boosts. Using large-scale survey experiments in Sweden and the United States concerning hypothetical developing countries, we find that they do. In particular, audiences perceived electoral autocracies as more democratic and were more likely to support giving them foreign aid when women's descriptive representation was greater. Beyond its contribution to our understanding of gender quotas and women's representation, this article contributes to broader debates about international reputation, human rights, and foreign aid attitudes.*

**Verification Materials:** The data and materials required to verify the computational reproducibility of the results, procedures, and analyses in this article are available on the *American Journal of Political Science* Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/93GVWI>.

The global spread of electoral gender quotas has transformed the composition of legislatures. Quotas are regulations that attempt to ensure that a minimum number or proportion of political candidates or representatives are women. More than 100 countries have adopted some form of gender quota, making quotas one of “the most significant political developments of the last thirty years” (Hughes, Krook, and Paxton 2015, 357). The average proportion of women in national parliaments has doubled during the quota era,

from 12% in 1997 to 24% in 2018 (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2018).

Many studies have sought to explain the widespread adoption of quotas.<sup>1</sup> One important explanation in this research concerns political elites' support for quotas, which is rooted in the strategic advantages quotas seem to offer. Research on European democracies has shown that elites favor quotas for reasons related to both inter- and intraparty competition: parties may attract new groups of voters by signaling to constituents that their party is

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<sup>1</sup>For excellent introductions, see Dahlerup (2006) and Krook (2007, 2009).

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progressive (Krook 2009, 221; Murray, Krook, and Opello 2012; Weeks 2018); men incumbents may increase their reelection chances by facing inexperienced women candidates with little voter support (Fréchette, Maniquet and Morelli 2008); and men party leaders may believe that quotas give them more control over candidate selection (Weeks 2018).<sup>2</sup>

Elites also have strategic reasons to support quotas in nondemocracies. A prominent explanation for autocracies' embrace of gender quotas is that these institutions enhance countries' international reputations for democracy and therefore deflect external pressure to democratize in the post-Cold War environment.<sup>3</sup> For example, in a cross-national study of quota adoption in the developing world, Bush (2011) argues that countries have attempted to signal their commitment to democracy by adopting quotas.

Within autocratic regimes, electoral autocracies are especially likely to have adopted quotas (Dahlerup 2007, 80; Hughes, Krook, and Paxton 2015, 368).<sup>4</sup> Being the most common type of autocracy today, electoral autocracies are regimes that hold multiparty elections with universal suffrage but "violate the liberal-democratic principles of freedom and fairness so profoundly and systematically as to render elections instruments of authoritarian rule" (Schedler 2006, 3).<sup>5</sup> Historically, electoral autocracies had fewer women in parliament than other regime types (Bjarnegård 2013). As such, their embrace of gender quotas represents a dramatic shift.

Importantly, electoral autocracies are especially attuned to their international reputations for democracy because they hold multiparty elections yet remain undemocratic in key ways (Levitsky and Way 2010, 18–19). In an international environment in which social and material rewards are linked to democracy, not having a

reputation for democracy is potentially costly. Due to strengthening global norms related to quotas and gender equality (Towns 2010), adopting gender quotas is one strategy political elites in electoral autocracies can use to improve their countries' reputations for democracy while maintaining other restrictions on political freedom.

Empirical analyses have suggested that adopting quotas is a widely used strategy among autocracies holding multiparty elections seeking to enhance their reputations. For instance, case studies of quota adoption in this group of countries, including Bangladesh (Valdini 2019), Cameroon (Adams 2007), Ethiopia (Valdini 2019), Jordan (David and Nanes 2011), Morocco (Sater 2007), Rwanda (Longman 2006; Burnet 2008), and Uganda (Goetz 2002), emphasize how dominant elites have sought to improve their countries' international reputations through quotas and women's representation. Similar arguments have been advanced about nondemocracies' embrace of other women's rights reforms (Donno, Fox, and Kaasik 2018; Htun and Weldon 2018, 44–47; Tripp 2019, 5–6).

Yet a key question remains unanswered: Do electoral autocracies really improve their reputations through the adoption of gender quotas? Answering this question is important because an improved reputation for democracy can potentially increase the likelihood of regime survival. But because countries often adopt quotas at the same time as they make other constitutional or electoral changes, it is difficult to pinpoint the causal effect of quotas. As such, the international incentives for quota adoption may have been overstated in the literature.

In this study, we addressed the question by conducting original survey experiments on large national citizen samples in Sweden and the United States. In both countries, we asked respondents to evaluate a hypothetical developing country that held multiparty elections that were biased in favor of the ruling party. We varied two traits, which were assigned independently: the presence or absence of a gender quota, and the proportion of women in the parliament (which was randomly assigned to be either 10%, 30%, or 50%). This design enabled us to identify the separate and combined effects of the existence of quotas and the level of women's descriptive representation. Our outcomes were beliefs about how democratic the country was and support for giving aid to the country. We included support for aid as an outcome variable because securing aid has been hypothesized as a key external motivator for electoral autocracies to adopt quotas (e.g., Edgell 2017).

We find that women's descriptive representation generated benefits in both Sweden and the United States. It increased support for aid in both countries, and the

<sup>2</sup>Related research has analyzed elites' responses to quotas. Party leaders sometimes attempt to reduce quotas' effectiveness by nominating women in nonelectable spots (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2016; Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2005; Esteve-Volart and Bagues 2012). Yet the larger pool of (inexperienced) women candidates has not decreased politician quality. If anything, quotas have increased legislator quality by pushing weak men politicians out (Baltrunaite et al. 2014; Besley et al. 2017).

<sup>3</sup>Studies of Western democracies do not stress this explanation (Towns 2010, chap. 7).

<sup>4</sup>As shown in the supporting information (SI, p. 1), as many as 70 nondemocracies have gender quotas.

<sup>5</sup>Electoral autocracies fall between full democracy and autocracy on a democracy scale and may be referred to as "hybrid," "competitive authoritarian," "multiparty authoritarian," "semiauthoritarian," or "semidemocratic" regimes. Since the early 1990s, most authoritarian regimes have held multiparty elections (Hadenius and Teorell 2007, 149).

mere existence of a quota increased support for aid in the United States, though not in Sweden. This pattern suggests that for Swedes, it is an improvement in women's representation, one desired *effect* of quotas, rather than the *existence* of quotas, which mattered. Women's representation also enhanced perceptions of democracy in Sweden. This relationship did not hold, however, in the United States, perhaps reflecting the fact that less than 20% of representatives in the U.S. Congress are women but the country is widely considered (including by its citizens) to be democratic. In sum, the findings support previously untested claims that electoral autocracies in a type of developing context secure reputational benefits through reforms designed to increase women's representation. The findings also reveal meaningful ways that domestic experiences shape how citizens think about women's representation globally.

The article contributes to the literature on gender and politics in general—and to research on quotas in particular—by showing that women's descriptive representation enhances countries' international reputations for democracy. Beyond this contribution, the article engages with several ongoing debates within international relations. First, we contribute to the literature on reputation and status within international politics. Much of this literature has focused on reputations for credibility and resolve (Brutger and Kertzer 2018; Crescenzi et al. 2012; Gray and Hicks 2014; Renshon, Dafoe, and Huth 2018). Yet international status is a much broader concept (Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth 2014, 373; Duque 2018) and encompasses other dimensions, including political gender equality (Towns 2010). We thus begin the work of theorizing and demonstrating the sources of states' reputations for democracy as well as exploring the potential material implications of improvements in states' international status via the mechanism of foreign aid. Our findings suggest that some citizens view women's representation as a necessary condition for democracy in other countries.

Second, we contribute to the debate about whether countries win international rewards from making human rights commitments. That countries are rewarded internationally for ratifying human rights treaties is a frequently posited but rarely tested relationship, and the evidence that we do have is mixed. For example, Nielsen and Simmons (2015) find that states do not generally secure more aid, preferential trade agreements, bilateral investment treaties, or praise in the form of Amnesty International reports when they sign onto human rights treaties. Yet Garriga (2016) finds that participation in the human rights regime affects investors' perceptions. Our findings about quotas' effects

are relevant to this debate because researchers argue that autocracies sign human rights treaties for reputational reasons that resemble those emphasized in the quota literature (e.g., Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2005). This study's experimental design, conducted at the level of citizens, complements previous observational research on human rights treaties while expanding the scope of study to reforms aimed at improving gender equality. Our findings suggest a mechanism through which countries can and do improve their reputations. Although quotas did not secure benefits on all dimensions or among all audiences in our study, that they secured some benefits supports arguments about the reputational logic of rights reforms.

Finally, our study has implications for the literature on public attitudes toward foreign aid in donor countries. There has been great interest in how citizens evaluate other countries beyond simply considering their economic need. For example, studies have established the effect of variables such as foreign country race (Baker 2013), respect for human rights (Allendoerfer 2017; Heinrich, Kobayashi, and Long 2018; Heinrich and Kobayashi 2020), transnational ties (Prather 2020), and religion (Blackman 2018). Yet to the best of our knowledge, performance on women's rights has not yet been examined, despite the many studies that hypothesize it ought to matter. Our findings about how women's descriptive representation affects support for aid are especially important given that the literature has established that public opinion shapes aid policy in democracies (Heinrich, Kobayashi, and Long 2018; Milner and Tingley 2015).

## Gender Quotas and International Reputation

Arguably, states today care about their international reputations “more than ever” due to the explosion of efforts to benchmark and publicize their performance on many dimensions (Kelley 2017, 5). As a consequence, a growing literature examines how concerns about international reputation shape governments' behavior.

A reputation is “any belief about a trait or behavioral tendency of an actor based on past actions” (Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth 2014, 372–373). A state's reputation reflects how diverse audiences perceive a country's performance, including “citizens, national elites, other governments, and the global community” (Kelley 2017, 34). Conceptualizing reputation in this way links a state's reputation to its image or status. A country has a good

reputation on an issue if audiences perceive that its behavior aligns with global norms or expected behaviors. Of course, audiences may assess a state differently depending on which standards they use and what they know about an issue.

Although states have multiple reputations that vary across audiences and issues, these reputations do not operate in isolation. A state's reputation on one issue may spill over to that on another issue (Erickson 2015; Gray and Hicks 2014). We focus on a potential positive spillover for a good reputation: from gender equality to democracy. Specifically, we examine whether an electoral autocracy aligning its performance with global norms about women's representation enhances its international reputation for democracy. A state might want to enhance its international reputation for democracy for both normative and instrumental reasons. In the case of gender quota adoption, previous research has emphasized the latter motive, arguing that electoral autocracies strategically use advances in gender equality to achieve goals associated with a better reputation, such as deflecting pressure to democratize and securing foreign aid and other material resources needed for their stability (Bush 2011; Edgell 2017).

To begin expanding this argument, our theoretical framework is rooted in a recognition of electoral authoritarian leaders' desire to stay in power. By making advances in the area of political gender equality, these leaders strive to increase their regimes' international status and thus to secure regime survival. The mechanism on which we focus emphasizes regimes' desire to deflect *external* pressure to democratize. We note, however, that political gender equality could deflect domestic pressure to democratize, as well.

Since the end of the Cold War, external pressures on states to democratize have increased. Democracy promotion has been described as a "core value" in the international system (McFaul 2004–2005), and democracy has become a key element of international status for states (Duque 2018, 580). Foreign economic aid has depended in part on donor countries' assessments of how democratic countries are, and the international community's efforts to promote democracy have increased through various programs (Bush 2015). These efforts make it important for countries to establish international reputations for democracy, which they seek to do through a variety of measures, including holding multiparty elections and inviting international observers to monitor their elections (Hyde 2011; Kelley 2012). Doing so helps states deflect international pressure to democratize and access what Hyde (2011, 52–53) calls "democracy-contingent benefits."

Meanwhile, women's descriptive representation is increasingly considered to be a core element of democracy.<sup>6</sup> Indicators of women's representation and gender equality are now included in many leading assessments of democracy, including Freedom House (Giannone 2010, 86), Varieties of Democracy (Coppedge et al. 2011, 256–257), and the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index (Economist Intelligence Unit 2019, 3). Moreover, supporting gender equality in representative politics has become an integral part of international democracy promotion efforts (Ottaway 2005). This shift has happened alongside a growth in the references to gender within international institutions, many of which have adopted the language, however incomplete, of "gender mainstreaming" (Hafner-Burton and Pollack 2002; True and Parisi 2013; Whitworth 2004). These changes in international norms have created incentives for electoral autocracies—in particular those that are vulnerable to international influence—to increase women's descriptive representation to enhance their reputations for democracy.<sup>7</sup>

Gender quotas offer a specific institutional mechanism through which women's descriptive representation can be increased. They come in various forms,<sup>8</sup> and quotas can be designed in such a way that they are well integrated into authoritarian institutions. For example, in Jordan, a quota introduced additional seats for women to elected bodies in such a way that they were likely to be filled with women from regime-supporting tribes (Bush and Gao 2017). This quota helped stabilize the monarchy by entrenching patronage systems and empowering political actors that supported the status quo. As the example suggests, part of quotas' appeal to electoral autocracies is that, in contrast to other democratizing measures that might also enhance their international status—such as loosening restrictions on the media—quotas do not

<sup>6</sup>That some consolidated democracies fall short on women's representation (see Fallon, Swiss, and Viterna 2012) does not prevent it from conveying information about democratic equality and justice (Townes 2010; Tremblay 2007; Zetterberg 2009). Similarly, inviting international observers was a way for democratizing states to signal their commitment to democracy even though consolidated democracies did not invite observers (Hyde 2011, 6).

<sup>7</sup>Of course, domestic (Kang and Tripp 2018) and transnational (Hughes, Krook, and Paxton 2015) women's groups have also played important roles demanding increased descriptive representation via mobilization in some of these regimes.

<sup>8</sup>Franceschet, Krook, and Piscopo (2012, 5) identify three types: reserved seats, legislative quotas, and party quotas. The first two categories are usually enshrined in the constitution or electoral law and may be introduced alongside other changes in the electoral system. Whereas reserved seats set aside seats for women, legislative quotas require parties to nominate a certain number or proportion of women. In contrast, party quotas are voluntarily adopted by parties that seek to commit themselves to nominating women.

necessarily challenge and may even reinforce their survival. By granting women access to the legislature, an electoral autocracy can demonstrate its willingness to include previously marginalized social groups in the political process without liberalizing the overall political system. As a consequence, some analysts consider quotas to be relatively “easy” reforms to adopt, providing a modernizing image without undermining regime survival (Burnet 2008; Goetz 2002; Hassim 2010).<sup>9</sup> In this way, quotas are one of a larger set of policy reforms designed to advance women’s rights employed by survival-focused autocracies (Donno and Kreft 2019; Longman 2006, 148).

Case studies of quota adoption have amply documented that autocracies holding multiparty elections perceive there to be external rewards for improving women’s descriptive representation. For example, this line of reasoning has been prominent in research examining the diffusion of quotas in the Arab world, the world region where levels of women’s representation have traditionally been lowest. Abou-Zeid (2006) argues that Arab countries have made superficial changes such as adopting gender quotas to secure foreign aid and loans, appease the United States and European states, and avoid international pressure to democratize. Case studies of quotas in authoritarian Morocco (Sater 2007) and Jordan (David and Nanes 2011) reinforce Abou-Zeid’s claim that countries adopt quotas to appeal to an international audience with the underlying goal of advancing regime survival.

However, these dynamics are far from unique to the Arab world. Rwanda is well known as a case where the government pursued quotas and other measures to include women at the same time as it became more autocratic. As Burnet writes, “The RPF’s [Rwandan Patriotic Front] pro-woman policies...give members of the diplomatic corps in Kigali liberty to overlook the regime’s authoritarianism and human rights abuses. When human rights observers present evidence of serious human rights violations, such as extrajudicial executions or ‘disappearances,’ diplomats often respond with an attitude of ‘at least, it’s not genocide,’ and then enumerate RPF successes, such as promoting women’s rights” (2008, 371).<sup>10</sup> Likewise, the desire of the Cameroon government to enhance its international legitimacy and attract foreign aid so as to facilitate domestic patronage has been emphasized in research on that country’s authoritarian “state feminist” policies (Adams 2007).

<sup>9</sup>This is not to say that it is always easy to recruit women to run for political office; see Fox and Lawless (2010) and Kanthak and Woon (2015).

<sup>10</sup>See also Berry (2018, 10).

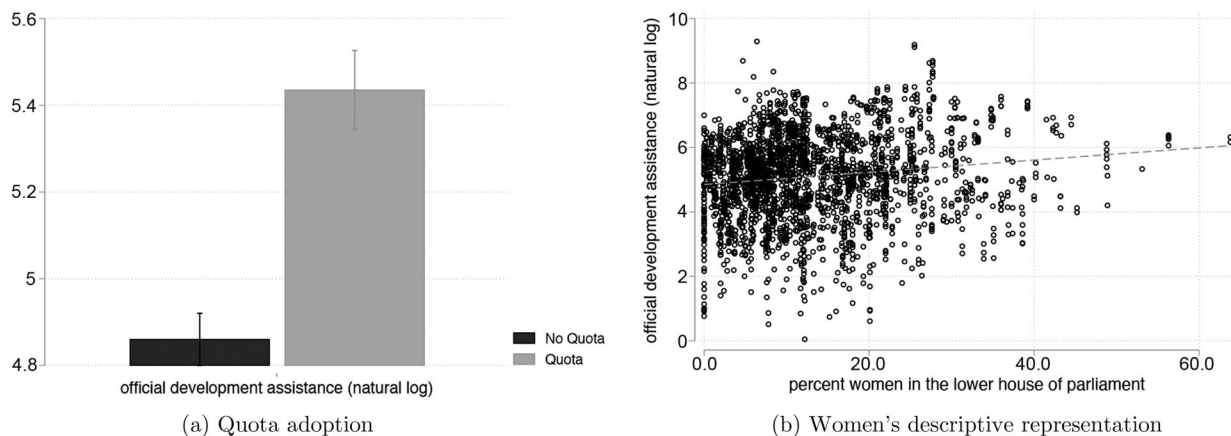
Although these studies tend to assume that international audiences update their beliefs about countries based on quotas, we do not know that they do. To the best of our knowledge, this topic has received no empirical attention to date. Moreover, we do not know whether it is quotas as such or one of quotas’ intended consequences—an increase in women’s descriptive representation—that matter. In our reading, many studies on the international benefits of quotas seem to use quota adoption and women’s increased descriptive representation interchangeably. Yet the relationship between quotas and women’s representation depends on factors such as the type and size of the quota and the electoral system (Jones 2009).

As a consequence, we distinguish theoretically between the existence of quotas (i.e., quota adoption) and one indicator of quotas’ effectiveness (i.e., increased descriptive representation).<sup>11</sup> Although both variables could signal a country’s commitment to democracy and thereby garner rewards for the state, they may do so in different ways. On the one hand, international audiences often use simple heuristics to evaluate countries (Gray and Hicks 2014). Quota adoption may serve as such a heuristic, providing information about the regime’s values or quality of representation. Indeed, adopting a quota makes it more likely that certain policies supported by women are passed (Clayton and Zetterberg 2018). On the other hand, it may be one of the intended consequences of quotas—increased descriptive representation of women—that signals a country is committed to democracy. According to this logic, international audiences may update their beliefs about a country only once the composition of the parliament has changed and women are better represented in politics. This signal may be especially relevant for more attentive or informed audiences who understand that quotas do not necessarily guarantee women’s representation. Based on these two logics, we seek to test the following hypotheses:

*H1:* Electoral autocracies that adopt gender quotas will enjoy better international reputations for democracy.

*H2:* Electoral autocracies that have more women represented in parliament will enjoy better international reputations for democracy.

<sup>11</sup>Quotas also affect substantive and symbolic representation, including public attitudes toward quotas (Barnes and Córdova 2016; Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Clayton and Zetterberg 2018; Franceschet, Krook, and Piscopo 2012; Meier 2008; Sacchet 2008).

**FIGURE 1 Women's Inclusion and Official Development Assistance (1990–2015)**

Note: Data on quotas and women's representation are from the QAROT data set, and data on ODA are from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. See footnote 12 for additional details.

## Research Design

Our goal is to identify the effect of quota adoption on countries' international reputations. One way of studying this topic is to look at how our two indicators of women's inclusion—quota adoption and women's descriptive representation in parliament—are correlated with foreign aid disbursements, which are one of the material benefits thought to be linked to international reputations for democracy. We expect countries to receive more official development assistance (ODA) when they have adopted a quota in the previous year and when their national parliament has had greater women's representation in the previous year.

Figure 1 shows that these expectations hold during the post-Cold War period, which is the era during which democracy promotion has been most prevalent. The relationship between quota adoption and foreign aid is statistically significant ( $p < .001$ , based on a two-tailed  $t$ -test), as is the relationship between women's representation and foreign aid ( $p < .001$ , based on a bivariate regression).<sup>12</sup> These relationships continue to hold when we control for plausible confounders—a country's level

<sup>12</sup>This analysis draws on the Quota Adoption and Reform over Time (QAROT) data set, using the variable on whether the country has adopted a gender quota as part of its constitution or secondary law. Information on women's representation also comes from QAROT and references the percent of the national legislature that is women; see Hughes et al. (2019). Foreign aid disbursements data come from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's Query Wizard for International Development Statistics, which is available at <https://stats.oecd.org/qwids> (accessed November 21, 2019). In the graphs, we rely on the natural log of countries' ODA receipts to account for the skewed nature of this variable.

of democracy or experience of a major episode of political violence in the previous year—that are related to both women's representation and aid, and when we include year fixed effects.<sup>13</sup>

Although these patterns are consistent with our hypotheses, one challenge is isolating the effect of quota adoption. In many cases, countries adopt quotas at moments of constitutional change or alongside other reforms (e.g., Hughes and Tripp 2015), which could also enhance countries' reputations and thus lead to material benefits such as foreign aid disbursements. As a consequence, we use an experimental framework. It has the advantage of allowing us to study the effect of a country having a quota on its international reputation through giving information about the quota to randomly selected respondents in the context of a survey. Such a design also allows us to separate the effect of quota laws from increases in women's representation in general, which is an important step as laid out above.

We selected Sweden and the United States as the countries for our experiment. The United States is the largest donor country in dollar terms, and Sweden is the most generous country in terms of aid as a percentage of gross national income.<sup>14</sup> Thus, they are important donor countries that autocracies may seek to impress through the inclusion of women in politics. Moreover, the cases are appropriate for testing our hypotheses because both countries have tied foreign aid to democratic development and gender equality. In the United States, for example, the Millennium Challenge

<sup>13</sup>See SI, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup>If we look at aid as a percentage of gross national income, the United States is a less generous donor.

Corporation provides foreign assistance to countries that are selected on the basis of their performance in terms of “ruling justly, investing in people, and fostering economic freedom;” the selection indicators used as of 2019 include measures of political and civil liberties and multiple measures of gender equality (Congressional Research Service 2019, ii, 31). In Sweden, democracy has for some time been a fundamental perspective guiding all development aid: the country offers no aid without demanding improvements within the area of democracy and human rights. In addition, gender equality was added to the list of perspectives guiding aid in 2016. Indeed, women’s political participation is a key aspect of the Swedish strategy to fostering democracy abroad (The Swedish Government 2016).

At the same time, the cases differ in meaningful ways. Sweden has near parity in terms of women’s representation in its parliament, with women comprising 47% of representatives at the time of our study. Sweden was an early adopter of voluntary party quotas: in the early 1990s, some Swedish parties included a parity clause in their statutes, which increased women’s representation in parliament to 40% in 1994. Since then, the proportion of women representatives in Sweden has never fallen below 40%; thus, moving from voluntary party quotas to a legislated quota law has not been on the political agenda. In contrast to the large number of women representatives in Sweden, the United States has historically had few women in Congress. In the mid-1990s, the U.S. Congress had only around 10% women, and only around 20% of Congresspersons were women at the time of our study. Given these different domestic experiences, gender quotas or women’s representation could have a more significant impact on a country’s reputation in Sweden than in the United States. To the extent that the findings across both cases are similar, the differences in the cases enhance the generalizability of our findings to the broader set of Western countries that care about states’ reputations for democracy (Seawright and Gerring 2008, 300–301).<sup>15</sup>

We surveyed citizens in both countries. In our reading, the literature on quota adoption and international reputation suggests that many international audiences are relevant for countries seeking to achieve good reputations: in addition to policy makers, government officials, and aid officials, we also highlight journalists, investors, human rights organizations, philanthropists, and

citizens. Given the ambiguity of the appropriate sample on which to study the reputational effects of quotas and women’s representation, and for reasons of practicality, beginning with citizen samples is a reasonable place to start. Moreover, the experimental literature on country reputation commonly focuses on effects among citizens, both in terms of theories and empirical tests (e.g., Brutger and Kertzer 2018; Renshon, Dafoe, and Huth 2018). Using a similar population allows us to speak to this literature and may shed light on more elite dynamics (Kertzer, forthcoming).

In addition to asking citizens about how democratic countries are, we asked them about their support for giving countries aid. Whereas the former measure captures the theorized effects of political gender equality on countries’ reputations for democracy, the latter measure captures one of the theorized material effects associated with an improved reputation. Our aid support measure also enables us to engage with the large research program on citizens’ attitudes toward aid in donor countries (Allendoerfer 2017; Bayram 2017; Dietrich, Hyde, and Winters 2019; Heinrich and Kobayashi 2020; Prather 2020). These studies, which mostly focus on the United States, suggest that the public cares about recipient countries’ records in terms of human rights and democracy. We build on them by looking comparatively across two donor countries and introducing the study of gender. Although public attitudes about aid are interesting in their own right, one reason to study public opinion is that research has shown that it contributes to shaping foreign policy in democracies (Heinrich, Kobayashi, and Long 2018; Milner and Tingley 2015). The mechanisms include voters punishing incumbents, strategic politicians (and bureaucrats) taking public opinion into account, and civil society mobilization (Kertzer 2016, 50–51). Public opinion also matters because citizens are themselves important sources of aid through the mechanism of private giving (Chaudhry and Heiss 2018), especially in the United States.

The Swedish survey was conducted from September 2017 to June 2018 as part of the European Values Survey (EVS). Over 1,000 randomly selected adults participated in the survey. The EVS drew two different subsamples in Sweden. However, the two subsamples resemble each other with respect to key characteristics such as sex, age, and geographic distribution. In addition, the overall sample compares fairly well with census data on various dimensions (e.g., educational attainment and unemployment).

The U.S. survey was conducted in November 2016 and was embedded in a larger online survey of American political attitudes, which was independently conducted by the authors. Over 1,000 adult Americans participated

<sup>15</sup>Another difference relates to citizens’ knowledge about aid. Swedes evince considerable knowledge according to surveys (Gullers Grupp 2018; Liljeström 2018). In contrast, Americans may be less engaged because the U.S. government does less to educate them about foreign aid and has many other salient dimensions of its foreign policy (Prather 2018).

in the survey, which was conducted by Survey Sampling International (SSI). SSI maintains a diverse national sample of Americans. Although not perfectly representative of the U.S. population, it compares favorably with census data on several dimensions and is commonly used (e.g., Brutger and Kertzer 2018, 703).

The experiment followed the same format in both cases.<sup>16</sup> We asked respondents to consider a hypothetical scenario that their country could face in the future. In it, respondents were told the government had created a new foreign aid initiative and was considering giving money via this initiative to a country. To minimize confounding, several details about the country in question were provided to all respondents.<sup>17</sup> The details were that the country was a developing country, the aid would be important to it, the country had held elections in which candidates from several parties could compete, and impartial election observers had described those elections as biased in favor of the ruling party. These details were meant to call to mind a country in our population of interest: an aid-reliant electoral autocracy in a type of developing context. We described the country as “developing” to convey that the country had some economic need and thus was a plausible aid recipient.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the baseline information, the scenario varied two traits, which were assigned independently of each other. First, respondents were told the proportion of women who had been elected to the parliament, which was randomly assigned to be 10%, 30%, or 50%. Second, half of the respondents were not told any information about gender quotas, and half of the respondents were told such information. Of those, half were told that the country had adopted a gender quota and half were told that the country had not adopted a quota. Electoral autocracies with quotas have had levels of women’s representation that are consistent with the treatments in our study. For example, Djibouti adopted a 10% reserved seat quota in 2002 and elected a parliament with 11% women

in 2003, Tanzania adopted a 30% reserved seat quota in 2005 and elected a parliament with 30% women the same year, and Rwanda adopted a 30% reserved seat quota in 2003 and elected a parliament with 49% women the same year (Krook 2009, 227).

Because the treatments were assigned at random, we study their effects via simple statistical tests and without controls in the main text. As we show in the SI (pp. 6–7), there were no statistically significant differences across the treatment conditions in terms of respondents’ age, gender, political interest, score along a left–right ideological scale, income level, education level, or party identification. We also show in the SI (pp. 14–19) that our results are similar when we include five control variables (the respondent’s gender, age, household income, left–right placement, and education) that predict our dependent variables and therefore improve the precision of our estimates of the treatment effects.

To assess whether respondents read the details about the country, we asked them at the end of the questionnaire whether they recalled what proportion of the legislature in the scenario was women. The response options were 10%, 20%, 30%, 40%, and 50%. As expected and shown in the SI (p. 8), a regression of the recalled proportion on the treatment proportion was highly statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ), which indicates that people had generally read the information about the gender composition of the country’s legislature.

As noted earlier, we have two outcome measures: beliefs about how democratic the country was and support for giving the country foreign economic aid. Both outcome variables were measured on 10-point scales. For example, on the aid question, 1 corresponded to an answer that their government “absolutely should not give aid” and 10 corresponded to an answer that their government “absolutely should give aid.” Pooling across the experimental conditions, we see in Figure 2 that the average respondent perceived the country as neither clearly democratic nor clearly undemocratic. The average Swedish response was 4.7 and the average American response was 4.5, both on a 10-point scale where higher numbers are more democratic. This ambivalence among both publics about the country’s status as a democracy is perhaps consistent with how more scholarly audiences would evaluate the country, because it bears some hallmarks of democracy (multiparty elections) but lacks others (free and fair elections).

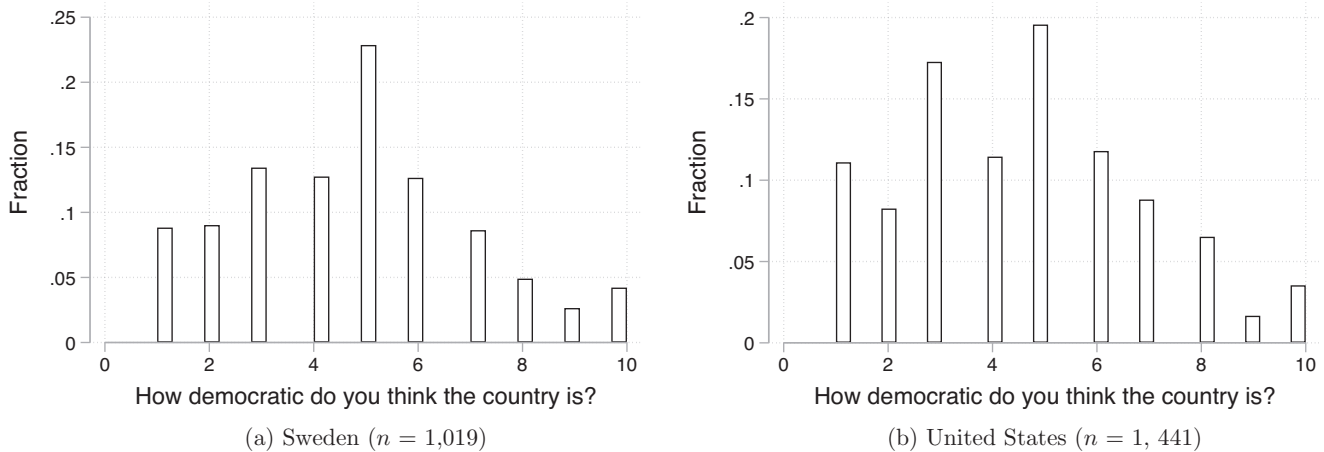
Similarly, as Figure 3 shows, baseline support for giving the country aid is mixed in both countries. The mean response on the 10-point scale was 5.3 in Sweden and 4.8 in the United States, implying that the average respondent was neither strongly supportive nor strongly unsupportive of giving the country foreign aid. In the

<sup>16</sup>For copies of both questionnaires in English, see the SI (pp. 2–4).

<sup>17</sup>Confounding could still have occurred. Experts would know, for example, that postconflict countries are more likely to adopt quotas. It is possible that a country being postconflict would affect the likelihood that it is perceived as democratic, worthy of aid, or both. We are uncertain, however, whether confounding would bias in favor of or against finding significant treatment effects. Moreover, we think that most citizens lack the knowledge to infer additional country attributes from our treatments. Nevertheless, we address this issue empirically by exploring treatment effects conditional on education, which plausibly indicates the likelihood of confounding. As shown in the SI (pp. 12–13), we do not find evidence of a significant interaction between the treatments and individuals’ education levels.

<sup>18</sup>Countries are eligible to receive ODA if they are low- or middle-income countries. Of the 70 nondemocracies with gender quotas listed in the SI, 69 are ODA eligible.



**FIGURE 2 Perception of Democracy (Pooled Across Experimental Groups)**

United States, there was a sizable proportion (16%) of respondents who did not support giving the country aid at all, whereas the proportion was smaller in Sweden (6%). This pattern may reflect different views in the two countries about economic redistribution, including cross-nationally (Alesina and Angeletos 2005, 960).

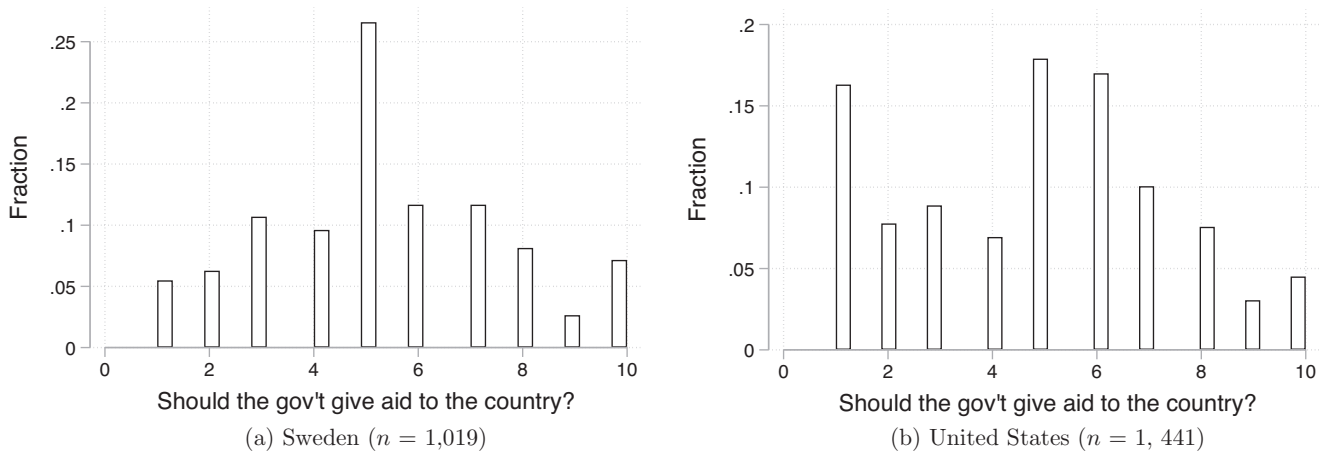
## Results

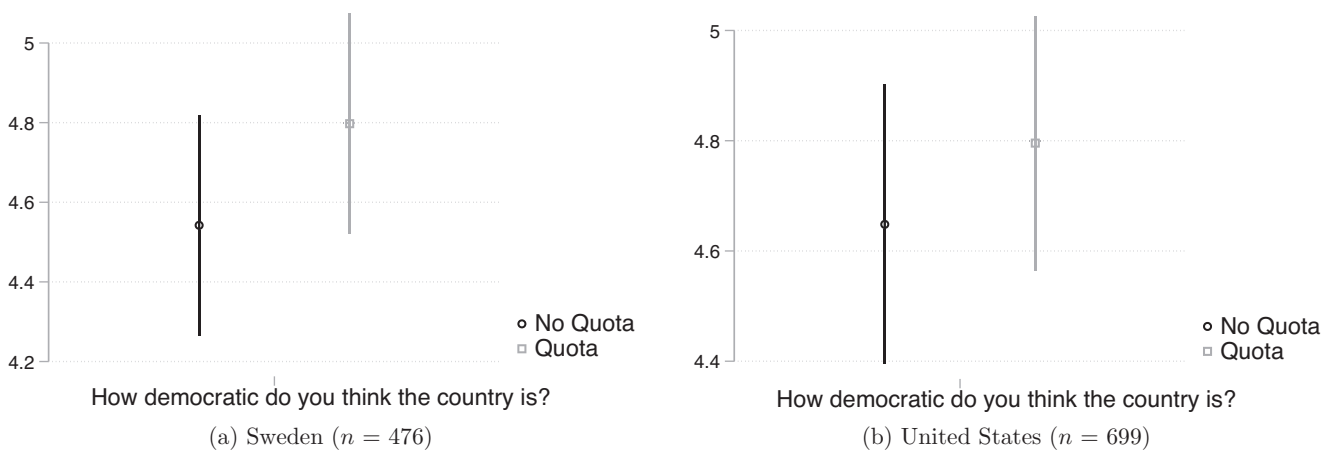
We begin our examination by analyzing the effect of the quota treatment. We compare people who received the prime informing them that the country had a quota to the people who received the prime informing them that the country had no quota. In neither the United States nor Sweden do we find clear evidence of a quota-induced improvement in perceptions of democracy. As graphs in Figure 4 show, however, the treatment effect trends in a

positive direction in both cases.

Looking at support for foreign aid, Figure 5 shows that in Sweden there is a similar null effect. If anything, individuals' support for giving aid decreased slightly in the quota condition. In contrast, in the United States, there is a clearer relationship in the expected direction: average support increases from 4.5 to 4.9 on the 10-point scale when a quota is primed ( $p = .08$ ). This shift represents about a 7% increase.

Next, we consider the effects of women's representation. We first consider the case where quotas were not primed. As Figure 6 shows, the representation treatment effect is positive in both cases. In Sweden, we see increases in perceived democracy when the parliament had 30% women representatives and further increases when the parliament had 50% women representatives. In the United States, the effect on perceived democracy plateaus at 30% women representatives. This variation may

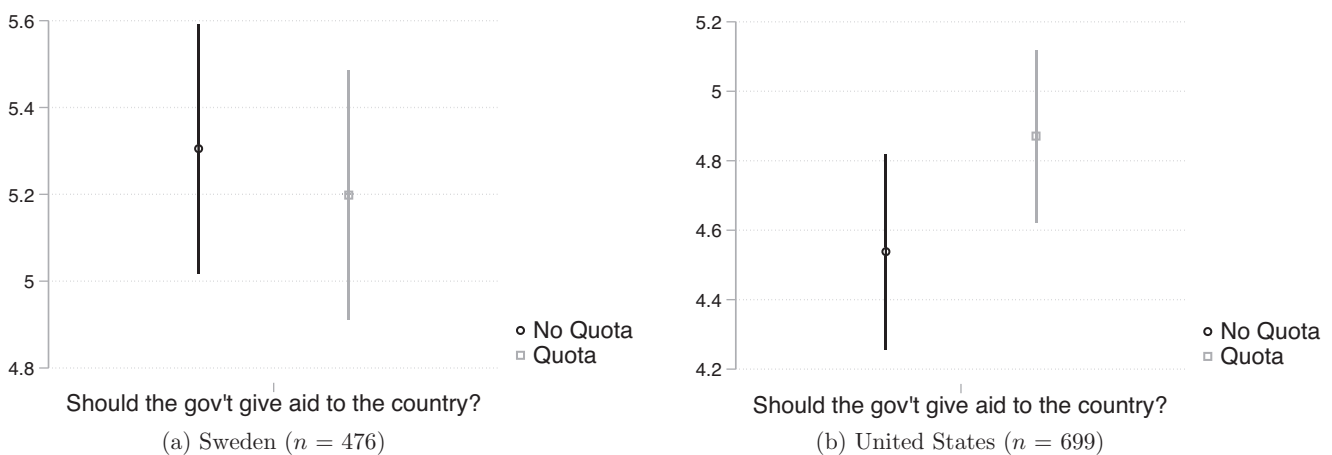
**FIGURE 3 Support for Foreign Aid (Pooled Across Experimental Groups)**

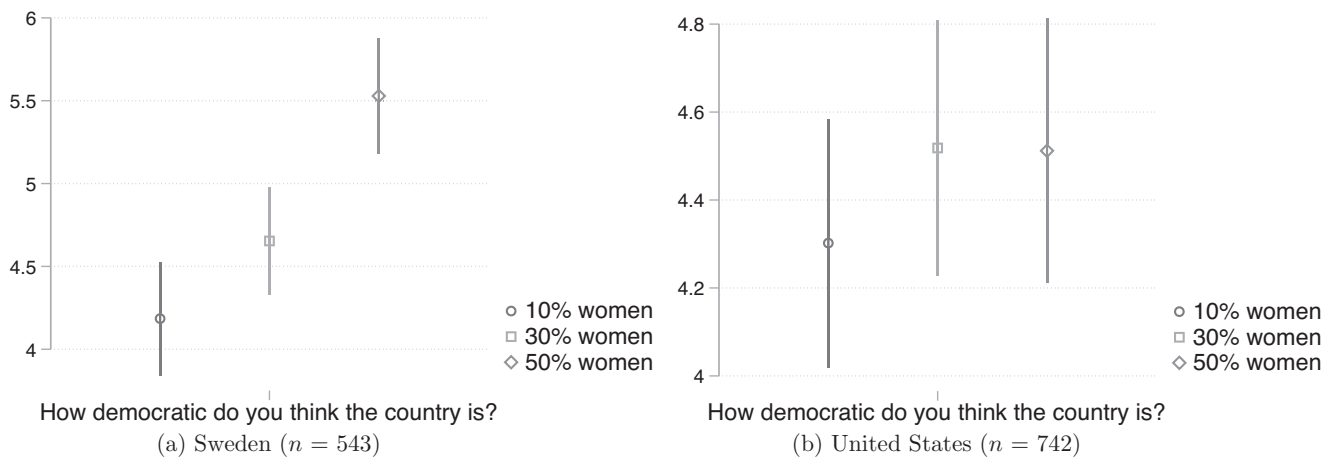
**FIGURE 4 The Effect of a Gender Quota on Perceptions of Democracy**

reflect the countries' different experiences with women's representation. For Americans, who have experienced no more than 20% women's representation in Congress, 30% and 50% women may have seemed to be equally significant democratic achievements. Such crude evaluations were perhaps less likely in Sweden, which has had more than 40% women in its parliament since 1994. Whereas the effect of the women's representation treatment was strongly statistically significant in Sweden ( $p < .001$ ), it was not significant at conventional levels in the United States. The effect size in Sweden was substantively large, with average perceptions of democracy increasing by 0.6 points on the 10-point scale (a 14% increase) when women's representation increased from 10% to 30% and by 1.3 points (a 31% increase) when it increased from 10% to 50%.

As Figure 7 shows, the patterns are broadly similar when we look at support for aid. Again, women's representation was associated with more favorable responses in Sweden. Moreover, each increase in women's representation was associated with some increase in support. A shift from 10% to 50% women's representation increased support for foreign aid by about 13% or 0.7 points on the 10-point scale ( $p < .001$ ). In contrast, in the United States, there was again a plateau dynamic, although in this case a regression of support for aid on women's representation was at least marginally statistically significant ( $p = .09$ ).

An alternative explanation for why individuals might support giving a country aid when its parliament has more women is that women's representation may be associated with less corruption (Dollar, Fisman, and Gatti

**FIGURE 5 The Effect of a Gender Quota on Support for Foreign Aid**

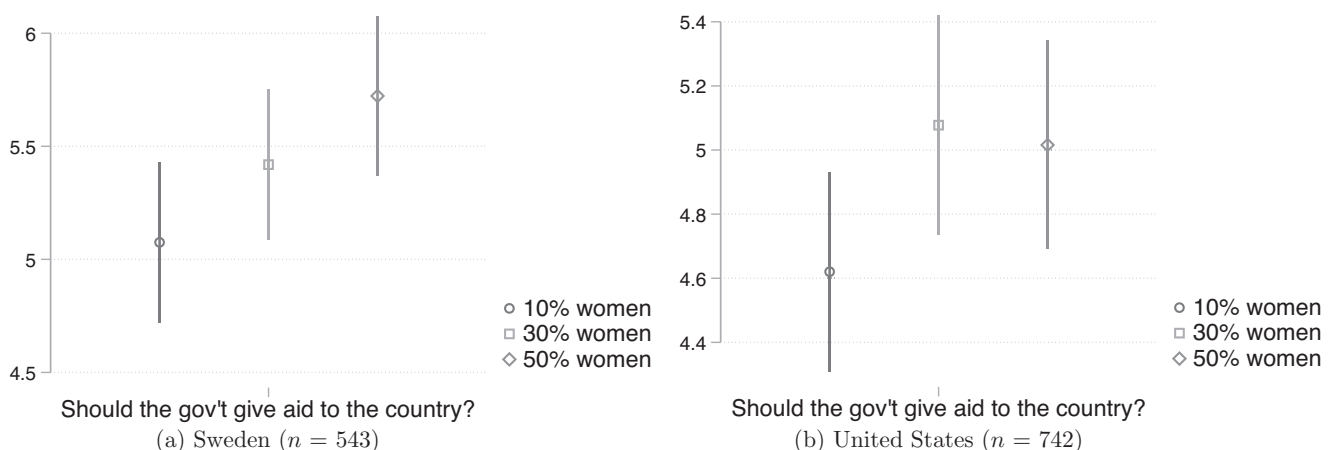
**FIGURE 6 The Effect of Women's Descriptive Representation on Perceptions of Democracy**

2001). Better governance is a desirable attribute in countries that receive aid. The plateau dynamic in the United States offers tentative evidence against that explanation, however, because it suggests that there is a ceiling beyond which additional women's representatives do not further increase support.

Finally, we examine the interaction between the effects of information about quotas for respondents who received that prime and the effects of the legislature's gender composition. To execute the analysis, we regressed perceived democracy and support for aid on the quota treatment, the proportion of women treatment, and their interaction. Using ordinary least squares regressions, we did not find that there is a clear interaction between the quota and women's representation treatments. These results are presented in the SI (p. 9).

Because the quota and women's representation treatments were randomly assigned, we do not control for other variables that might otherwise be related to perceptions of democracy or support for aid in our main analyses. However, one intriguing individual attribute is respondent gender. Although women were generally more supportive of aid than men in our surveys, we did not find consistent evidence of interactions between respondent gender and our experimental treatments. Further details of these analyses can be found in the SI (pp. 10–11). We also found little evidence of a significant interaction between our treatments and respondents' party identification or beliefs about why women are underrepresented in politics, two other potentially significant moderators.

Taken together, these results provide some support both for H1 and—a little bit more so—H2. Thus,

**FIGURE 7 The Effect of Women's Descriptive Representation on Support for Foreign Aid**

they suggest that quotas and women's representation do enhance countries' international reputations for democracy. The cases varied in terms of which treatment—quotas or women's representation—was most impactful and on which outcomes. In particular, quotas as such only had an impact in the United States. It is possible that the nonexistence of a quota system in the United States, and its majoritarian electoral system that discourages such a quota from being introduced, prompted Americans to perceive the existence of a quota as a substantial reform for gender equality. In Sweden, what mattered more was women's descriptive representation, both for perceptions of democracy and support for foreign aid. One way of interpreting these findings is that in Sweden, where domestic norms of women's representation are strong and the public has experience with successfully implemented party quotas, the public's concerns are mainly with women's representation as opposed to quota laws. Put differently, the Swedish experience is that one of the primary objectives of legislative quotas—increased descriptive representation—can be achieved without their adoption. In general, however, the results support the idea that passing quotas and including women in politics help aid-reliant electoral autocracies that are developing countries manage their international reputations. The signal sent by improving women's representation matters, even though the extent of benefits varies with the audience.

## Conclusion

Scholars have argued that adopting gender quotas makes electoral autocracies appear more democratic and modern to international audiences. Yet evidence supporting this proposition has been lacking. We thus presented, to the best of our knowledge, the first empirical analysis of quotas' effects on country reputations for democracy. To do so, we conducted original survey experiments on national samples of citizens in Sweden and the United States.

Our results largely support the idea that adopting and implementing quotas enhances aid-reliant electoral autocracies' reputations. In particular, one of the intended consequences of quotas—improvements in women's descriptive representation—matters. This effect is especially clear in Sweden, regardless of whether we focus on perceptions of democracy or support for foreign aid. Quotas as such also shaped Americans' attitudes. The results suggest that international audiences' views of developing countries are, at least to some extent, based on

country performance in terms of gender equality. Thus, adopting effective quotas may be a viable strategy for the many electoral autocracies seeking to deflect external pressure to democratize. Our research design is not able to identify where reputational concerns rank among the various reasons why electoral autocracies adopt quotas, which is an interesting topic for future research; instead, it validates a previously untested assumption that international audiences update on the basis of quotas and women's descriptive representation.

Our findings have important implications for both scholars and practitioners working on women's representation. From a scholarly perspective, gender and politics researchers emphasize the importance of looking at the incentives for predominantly male elites to increase gender equality in politics. Whereas previous research on European democracies has pointed at the electoral incentives for men to support quotas (e.g., Besley et al. 2017; Fréchette, Maniquet and Morelli 2008; Murray, Krook, and Opello 2012; Weeks 2018), our study in a specific authoritarian context shows that they also have international reputational incentives to do so. In aid-reliant electoral autocracies that are developing countries, the reputational benefits that increased gender equality provide could have far-reaching consequences. Because an improved performance in terms of women's political inclusion spills over to countries' reputations for democracy, it can strengthen electoral autocracies both politically and economically and help them survive. Though the survival benefits come in many forms, one clear example comes from the effects we identify in terms of support for foreign aid. As a consequence, international organizations should be cautious when evaluating and engaging with these regimes. Although political gender equality is a key characteristic of democracy, it should not be analyzed in isolation from the political institutions in which it is embedded.

Finally, our work points to several pending issues that we hope will prompt future research. We highlight three. First, it is relevant to investigate the extent to which our findings travel to other theoretically relevant audiences, such as donor officials. Given that gender mainstreaming has become commonplace within democracy promotion, our intuition is that elite audiences would respond at least as positively to our treatments as citizens. Future studies might also examine to what extent the findings vary with the description of the country's economy, which we described as developing and reliant on aid, and with the type of (authoritarian) regime.

Second, although we have shown that reforms addressing certain political inequalities enhance

countries' international reputations, we do not know the extent to which international audiences perceive these reforms to be substitutes for "harder" democratizing measures (such as loosening restrictions on the media) that challenge the autocratic features of a regime. Future research could examine the relative impact of different sorts of democratizing reforms on countries' international reputations.

Third and finally, it is important to pay increased attention to—and develop a comparative research agenda on—women's agency in authoritarian regimes. Despite our focus on authoritarian regimes' strategic use of quotas, and although scholars have been concerned about a lack of women's substantive representation in such regimes (Franceschet, Krook, and Piscopo 2012; Htun 2003), research has shown that women sometimes manage to play a meaningful role in authoritarian legislatures (Htun and Weldon 2018). For instance, in addition to pushing for the revision of the law that reserves a number of parliamentary seats for women, women legislators in electoral authoritarian Uganda have been able to carve out institutional space to push for gender equality policies and achieve legislative gains (Johnson and Josefsson 2016). Thus, although authoritarian leaders may use domestic quota activists' energy for their own ends (Geisler 1995), gender quotas may still generate significant changes in society under the right conditions.

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## Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

**Appendix 1:** List of countries with quotas

**Appendix 2:** Survey questionnaires

**Appendix 3:** Supplementary analyses