

## Barriers to Women's Representation: Electoral Systems Fact Sheet No. 3

Barriers against women's political participation do not just come in the form of political culture and socio-economic patterns. In a comparison of 23 democracies, the most important predictor of the extent of women's participation in parliaments was the type of electoral system in place<sup>1</sup>. There are two main types of electoral systems- proportional representation and the winner take all majoritarian/pluralistic type- and they produce very different results for women.

### What Works for Women:

- Proportional Representation has proven to be the most important predictor of high numbers of women in parliament. Voters cast their votes by party, and in some cases also by individual. Seats in parliament are allotted in proportion to the votes each party receives. This kind of system provides an incentive for parties to broaden their appeal by adding women to their party lists. In cases where parties mandate the percentage of women to be included on lists- as in the rule of "every second seat a woman"- the results are significant. More women are also elected in countries with systems that mix elements of the proportional representation and majoritarian systems within their legislatures. The 10 countries with the highest percentage of women in Parliament have systems that include Proportional Representation.
- They are:

Country	Percentage of Women in the Upper and Lower Houses	Electoral Systems <sup>2</sup>
Sweden	42.7%	Multimember RP
Denmark	37.4%	Multimember RP
Finland	36.5%	Multimember RP
Norway	36.4%	Multimember PR
Netherlands	36.0%	Multimember PR
Iceland	34.9%	Multimember PR
Germany	30.9%	Mixed PR & Majority syst.
New Zealand	30.8%	Mixed PR & Majority syst.
Mozambique	30.0%	Multimember PR
South Africa	29.8%	Multimember PR

- Party Thresholds: Some proportional representation systems require a minimum level of electoral support for a party to be represented in parliament. A low threshold, or none at all, encourages the proliferation of mini-parties with only one or two representatives, in most cases the party leaders. Because party leaders are commonly men, these low thresholds can work against women's election to parliament.
- Multi-member districts: When the size of an electoral district is increased, small parties have a better chance to win more seats. The larger the district, the more seats up for

grabs, and the more incentive for the parties to balance their tickets to include a broader range of voter interests. These balanced tickets are more likely to include women. Generally, higher average district magnitude leads to the election of more women. Smaller districts often result in a lower turnover in representatives, leaving more candidates-women and men-with the difficult task of running against incumbents.

#### What Doesn't Work for Women:

- The majoritarian/pluralistic system has some of the worst results for women's representation. This system is used in about 40 percent of countries, primarily the United Kingdom and its former colonies, including the United States. In this system there is usually only one seat per district and whichever individual polls the most votes wins.
- In these winner take all electoral systems women have much less success at increasing their participation in government. Of the nine countries with no women in the legislature, seven-Djibouti, Jordan, Kuwait, Palau, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu-use a majority system and one, Federated States of Micronesia, has a mixed system. The United Arab Emirates appoints members to parliament.

#### Sources

1. "Women in National Parliaments, Situation as of Novemebr 10, 1999," InterParliamentary (IPU) Union Data.
2. Wilma Rule, Electoral Systems, Contextual Factors and Women's Oppurtunity for Election to Parliament in Twenty-Three Democracies, 40 (3) THE WESTERN POLITICAL QUARTERLY 476, 494 (1987)
3. Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union. [www.ipu.org](http://www.ipu.org)