

The Influence of Democracy on Gender Equality

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Strong democracies directly foster women's rights and empowerment, yet authoritarian regimes increasingly adopt gender reforms for legitimacy without democratizing or adopting egalitarian attitudes. Democratic effects materialize primarily through accumulated democratic experience rather than regime transitions alone, as electoral accountability, open civic spaces, and dispersed power structures enable women's movements to mobilize effectively. Gender equality advances through coordinated efforts across legal, institutional, and societal domains, with democracy serving as a necessary but insufficient condition for sustained transformation in women's status.

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The Case for Democracy series. This brief is part of The Case for Democracy series, which curates academic scholarship on the impacts of democracy across various domains of governance and development. Drawing from an exhaustive review of the literature, this analysis presents selected works that encompass significant findings and illustrate how the academic conversation has unfolded. For more information on the series, visit <https://cddrl.fsi.stanford.edu/dal>.

Background

INFLUENCED BY GLOBALIZATION, DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS, AND STRATEGIC STATE INTERVENTIONS, contemporary scholarship reveals that gender equality outcomes cannot be attributed to regime type alone. Early modernization theorists suggested that economic development would automatically translate into gender equality as traditional norms eroded. However, recent research demonstrates that while democracy creates enabling conditions for women's rights advancement, the translation of democratic openings into meaningful protection requires democratic consolidation.

Democracy's Impact on Gender Equality

GENDER EQUALITY IS STRONGEST IN DEMOCRACIES, with flawed democracies exhibiting 33% lower egalitarian gender attitudes than full democracies, and hybrid and authoritarian regimes showing approximately 60% lower levels.¹ Caroline Beer (2009)² findings are consistent with this descriptive pattern and posits the unique importance of democratic consolidation in the development of gender equality. Although economic development and modernization remain important contextual factors, they prove insufficient by themselves to explain differences in gender equality across countries. Beer's analysis of 179 countries between 1960-2004 across five measures of women's status (fertility rates, women's labor force participation,

¹ V-Dem. 2021. "Are Democracies Better for Social Protection of the Poor, Gender Equality, and Social Cohesion?"

² Beer, Caroline. 2009. "Democracy and Gender Equality." *Studies in Comparative International Development* 44 (3): 212–27.

educational attainment, female population ratios, and female life expectancy) reveals that the stock of democracy and women's suffrage was related to significant improvements in three of the five measures, with illiteracy rates emerging as the most consistent negative predictor. Most importantly, these findings suggest that, even in poor countries with low public spending and high illiteracy, democracy and women's substantive participation can significantly improve women's lives if the democratic experiences accumulate over sufficient time periods.

THOMAS B. ANDERSEN (2023)³ OFFERS EVIDENCE ON THE CAUSAL LINK, showing that democracy itself promotes gender equality. Andersen employs the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) as a shock, or instrumental variable, that triggered democratization waves in Catholic-majority countries that were on the verge of democratizing (as opposed to non-Catholic countries). The estimates show that a one standard deviation increase in democracy leads to approximately a 0.6 standard deviation increase in women's political empowerment, a substantial effect as compared to alternative correlational models without instrumentation. The study further challenges modernization theory's claims by showing that democracy has a particular causal impact on gender equality as opposed to both democracy and gender equality emerging as parallel consequences of economic development.

The data. Most quantitative studies examining democracy and gender equality rely on cross-national datasets combining measures from V-Dem, Freedom House, the World Bank's Women, Business, and Law (WBL) index, and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Index. Key methodological challenges include measuring formal legal rights versus lived realities, accounting for bidirectional causality between democracy and gender equality, and isolating democracy's effect from confounding factors like economic development and globalization.

³ Andersen, Thomas B. 2022. "Does Democracy Cause Gender Equality?" *Journal of Institutional Economics*, September, 1–19.

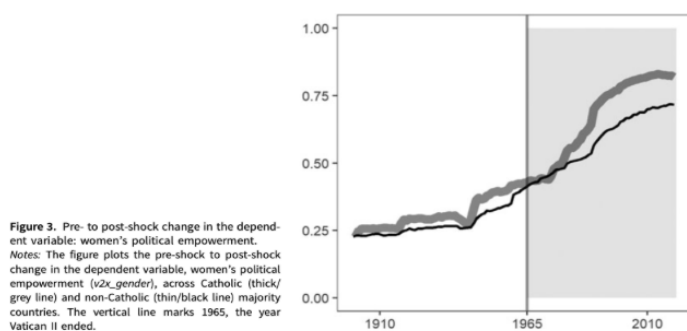
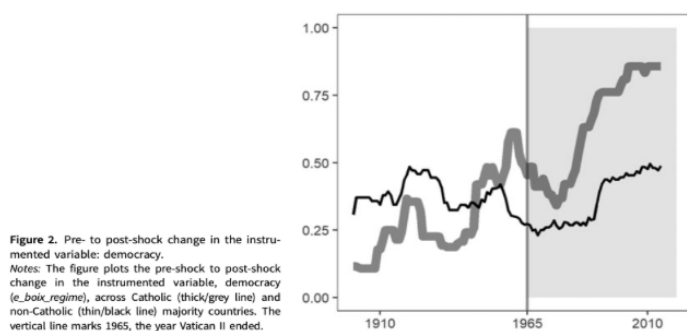


Figure 1: Change in democracy (instrumented by the Second Vatican Council (1965)) and women's political empowerment across Catholic and non-Catholic countries. Taken from Andersen (2023).

Mechanisms Enabling Gender Equality

DEMOCRACY INTERACTS WITH OTHER STRUCTURAL FACTORS to shape the spectrum of gender equality outcomes. Mala Htun and S. Laurel Weldon (2010) propose a comprehensive framework that incorporates these complexities to help make sense of cross-national variation in women's legal rights.⁴ This framework explains patterns like Latin American countries outperforming Scandinavian welfare states on violence-related policies, right-wing governments adopting gender quotas, and Catholic Ireland banning abortion while Vatican-based Italy provides it at state expense. Scholars disaggregate "gender policy" by distinct issue and agent-context interaction. In terms of issues, policies either address women's status as a group (e.g. family law, violence against women, abortion legality, gender quotas) or class-based inequalities in the division of labor (e.g. paid parental leave, government-funded childcare, abortion funding). Policies can also vary in the extent to which they challenge religious doctrine or traditional authority. The framework then identifies four contextual factors shaping policy outcomes: the degree of democracy, state capacity, institutional legacies and vulnerability to international pressure.

⁴ Htun, Mala, and S. Laurel Weldon. 2010. "When Do Governments Promote Women's Rights? A Framework for the Comparative Analysis of Sex Equality Policy." *Perspectives on Politics* 8 (1): 207–16.

ELENA ORTIZ ET AL. (2023)⁵ PROBE THE ELEMENTS OF DEMOCRACY THAT ARE IMPORTANT TO PRODUCING GENDER EQUALITY. Findings show that places where women thrive tend to exhibit stronger democratic institutions, but the relationship varies significantly depending on which dimensions of democracy and women's status are examined. Using the multidimensional Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Index, authors find that countries with cleaner elections exhibit lower discrimination, higher female educational attainment, better cell phone access, greater parliamentary representation, and stronger economic participation. Authors also conclude that the element of checks and balances enables "forum shopping" where dispersed power across government branches allows women's groups to pursue interests through judiciary when legislature is hostile, through legislature when judiciary is antagonistic, or through media when government institutions are unsupportive. Lastly, freedom of assembly creates open civic spaces where women's organizations can mobilize effectively.

⁵ Ortiz, Elena, Joshua Allen, Robert U. Nagel, and Jessica M. Smith. 2023. "Connecting Informal and Formal Exploring the Links between Peace Talks: Women's Status and Democracy."

Authoritarian Regimes and Gender Equality

AS DEMONSTRATED BY THE LITERATURE, democracy levels likely lead to better gender equality outcomes. Yet, the evidence also shows

that authoritarian regimes sometimes prioritize women's advancement. Approximately 25% of contemporary autocracies, especially party-based authoritarians, perform as well or better on women's rights as the average developing democracy, with the average proportion of female legislators now equal across democracies and dictatorships in the developing world, per Donno and Kreft (2019).⁶ This authoritarian *genderwashing*, coined by Elin Bjarnegård and Pär Zetterberg (2022)⁷ challenges assumptions about the relationship between democracy and gender equality, seeing as authoritarians strategically adopt women's rights reforms for legitimacy purposes. This expectation creates opportunities for gender advocates to leverage democracy discourse, but it increases the risk of exploitation by autocrats who can gain legitimacy without democratizing their systems. To exemplify the phenomenon, authors show that, of the 75 countries that have adopted gender-based quota laws for parliamentary representation, approximately two-thirds have been ruled by nondemocratic governments.

AUTOCRATS EMPLOY THREE LEGITIMATION STRATEGIES when weaponizing women's rights depending on their audience of interest and political imperatives. First, procedure-based legitimation targets political opposition through changes to electoral rules that affect women's representation. Mechanisms like gender quotas can strategically affect party dynamics, allow autocrats to strengthen party loyalty, and reward supporters with positions. Second, prestige-based legitimation targets the international community through symbolic but highly visible improvements. International legitimacy proves especially important for aid-dependent countries and regimes facing international criticism. Third, performance-based legitimation targets specific groups through the strategic provision of benefits in order to build support while maintaining authoritarian control. Isabel Castillo (2024)⁸ demonstrates this strategic dimension historically by revealing that most Latin American women gained voting rights under conditions that did not simultaneously advance political competition; enfranchisement served both democratic reformers and authoritarian legitimacy seekers.

Emerging Themes

THE ADVANTAGES OF DEMOCRACY ARE REFLECTED IN THE KINDS OF STRATEGIES WOMEN'S GROUPS ADOPT in democratic as opposed to non-democratic regimes. Mona Tajali (2015)⁹ examines how women's groups in Turkey and Iran strategically campaign for political representation by interacting with political elites using

⁶ Donno, Daniela, and Anne-Kathrin Kreft. 2018. "Authoritarian Institutions and Women's Rights." *Comparative Political Studies* 52 (5): 720–53.

⁷ Bjarnegård, Elin, and Pär Zetterberg. 2022. "How Autocrats Weaponize Women's Rights." *Journal of Democracy* 33 (2): 60–75.

The data. Gender equality measures capture different dimensions of gender equity: the WBL index focuses on legal rights, political representation data measures descriptive representation in legislatures, labor force participation reflects economic engagement, and attitudinal surveys assess beliefs. These measurement decisions shape empirical findings. Aggregate patterns may not reflect individual experiences, and formal de jure provisions often diverge from de facto realities on the ground.

⁸ Castillo, Isabel. 2024. "Democratization and Inclusion: What Women's Enfranchisement Tells Us about the Second Wave of Democracy." *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies* 30 (2): 175–88.

⁹ Tajali, Mona. 2015. "Islamic Women's Groups and the Quest for Political Representation in Turkey and Iran." *The Middle East Journal* 69 (4): 563–81.

context-appropriate discourse. Turkish activists adopted "radical" framing that challenged the pro-religious AKP's patriarchal discourse and built alliances with secular feminists, while Iranian women used framing that aligned with the theocratic regime's religious discourse to avoid Western associations. Despite different approaches, both campaigns achieved some success: Turkey's CEDAW Committee statement against the headscarf ban and Iran's 2009 appointment of Minister Marzieh Vahid-Dastjerdi. Tajali emphasizes Islamic women's agency in contesting patriarchy from within religious movements and that gender equality demands can be articulated through religious as well as secular frameworks, ultimately challenging assumptions about women in general as passive subjects determined by their contexts.

Looking Ahead

AS DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING ACCELERATES GLOBALLY, critical questions emerge about whether gender equality gains will prove resilient or reversible. Future research must investigate how the erosion of democratic institutions affects women's rights, whether the "genderwashing" strategies of autocrats can sustain improvements without democratic foundations, and how women's movements can maintain momentum in increasingly restrictive civic spaces. Understanding these dynamics will prove essential for scholars and practitioners seeking to advance both democracy and gender equality in an era of political turbulence.

The data. These challenges reflect questions about how we conceptualize, measure, and understand the relationship between political regimes and gender outcomes. The directionality of influence between democracy and gender equality remains contested: do democratic institutions promote gender equality, or do societies with more egalitarian gender norms prove more capable of sustaining democratic governance? Democracy and gender equality may be mutually constitutive. Gender equality, measured through legal rights, political representation, labor force participation, or attitudinal surveys, may capture formal de jure provisions while missing the realities on the ground. These measurement decisions shape empirical findings and normative understandings.

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