

8-8-2012

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Carlos Navarro

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Recommended Citation

Navarro, Carlos. "Increase in Women Elected to Congress in July Improves Mexico's Gender-Equity Ratio." (2012).
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Increase in Women Elected to Congress in July Improves Mexico's Gender-Equity Ratio

by Carlos Navarro

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 2012-08-08

Most media focus in the aftermath of the July 1 elections in Mexico has been on the presidential race and the controversies surrounding the election of Enrique Peña Nieto as Mexico's new chief executive. The center-left coalition has questioned the methods by which Peña Nieto's Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) obtained votes and has challenged the validity of the election ([SourceMex, July 18, 2012](#)).

But other important trends from the election have been overshadowed by the controversy, including advances in gender representation in the Mexican Congress. This was the first election since the major political parties and the electoral court (Tribunal Electoral del Poder Judicial de la Federación, TEPJF) reached an agreement to increase the number of women legislators in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate to 40% of the total. Under the accord, each of the three major parties had to designate at least 120 women candidates for the Chamber of Deputies and 26 for the Senate. The parties fell short by a few percentage points, reaching a ratio of only 37% for the 2012-2015 session of the Chamber of Deputies and 33% for the 2012-2018 session of the Senate.

Political parties fall just short of 40% target in lower house

Although legislators failed to achieve their goal, the results were a major advance from the last Congress. A total of 183 women will serve in the lower house in 2012-2015. This compares with 131, or 26%, for 2009-2012. The total includes both legislators elected through a direct vote in one of country's 300 districts and the at-large representatives selected based on the percentage of votes received by each party. Members of the Chamber of Deputies are elected for a single three-year term.

The results were not as close to the target in the Senate, where 42 of the 128 candidates who will serve in the upper house are women, about 33% of the total number. The new senators will serve a six-year term from 2012 until 2018. Still, the results are an improvement from 2006-2012, when only 29 women served in the Mexican Senate.

Although the parties fell short of the targets, the Centro de Estudios para el Adelanto de las Mujeres y la Equidad de Género (CEAMEG) and others lauded the advances in the past election. But the organization noted that the parties would not have moved in the direction of gender equity without the intervention of the TEPJF in November 2011. "It has been demonstrated that when one is forced to comply with the spirit and the letter of the law, extraordinary results are attained," CEAMEG said in a report examining the results of the 2012 federal elections.

Ruth Zavaleta, a former PRD deputy who served as president of the Chamber of Deputies in 2007-2008, said the increased numbers are important because women legislators will now have the opportunity to serve in important leadership positions, such as chairs of the finance, interior, and justice committees, whereas they were previously relegated to committees that dealt primarily with social issues.

Zavaleta said the challenge of the new bloc of women legislators is to demonstrate that they can be as effective in Congress as their male counterparts. "The quotas are not sufficient," said the ex-legislator, who currently heads the TEPJF division that deals with gender equity. "The women have to be assertive in their decision making and make themselves more visible to the population. In that manner, they will be able to combat the male-dominated culture."

"I am convinced that now is the time to open the door to legislation and public policies that take into account the realities that Mexican women face," former PRI federal Deputy Claudia Ruiz Massieu wrote in a guest column in the Mexico City daily newspaper *El Universal*. "We have to develop innovative and efficient ways to end the burden of gender inequality in our country."

In addition to the TEPJF, the Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE) also became involved in promoting gender equity in the recent elections. "It was gratifying to note that our efforts to promote gender equality were recognized internationally and that we have reached our goals in a shorter period than anticipated," said IFE councilor Francisco Guerrero Aguirre. "This was a joint effort by the legislative branch and the electoral authorities, both the IFE and the TEPJF."

This year's results will certainly improve Mexico's ranking internationally in legislature gender equity. Before the July 1 elections, Mexico already ranked among the top 40 nations in the world in gender equity in the lower house of Congress, according to statistics compiled by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). Among Latin American countries, only Cuba, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Argentina, Ecuador, and Guyana, ranked higher than Mexico as of June 30, 2012. El Salvador was tied with Mexico.

The recent election, which brought Mexico's gender-equity rate to about 37%, would compare favorably with the ratio of women legislators in Costa Rica and Argentina but would still fall below the two leading countries in Latin America—Cuba with 45% and Nicaragua with 40%.

Of the 183 women who will serve in the new Chamber of Deputies, 91 won the seat through direct election. This is almost one-third of the 300 seats that were up for election around the country. Another 92 women were picked to fill the at-large seats allocated based on the percentage of the vote won by each party or coalition.

Ninety-one women elected directly by voters to lower house

The breakdown shows that each party made a strong effort to select women to represent it in the congressional elections. Forty-five women elected to Congress belong to the *Compromiso por México* coalition, comprising the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and the Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVEM). Another 18 candidates were affiliated with the PRI, 20 represented the center-left coalition *Movimiento Progresista*, and eight ran under the PAN banner.

The *Movimiento Progresista* includes the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), the Partido del Trabajo (PT), and *Movimiento Ciudadano* (MC).

Many PAN candidates lost in the direct elections, so the party had to assign a larger proportion of at-large seats to women. Twenty-eight women will fill at-large posts for the PAN, compared with 23 for the PRI, 21 for the PRD, five for the PT, four for the MC, and five for the *Partido Nueva Alianza*, which did not win a single legislative district but obtained more than 2% of the vote in the national election.

The women elected to Congress will be mostly newcomers, while those assigned an at-large seat are generally veteran politicians, including party leaders and insiders like Graciela Ortiz and Guadalupe Flores of the PRI, Verónica Juárez Piña and Angélica de la Peña Gómez of the PRD, Mariana Gómez del Campo of the PAN, and Luisa María Alcalde Lujan of the MC. The at-large legislators are the most likely to gain appointments as committee chairs.

Among the women who won direct election to the Senate were outgoing Toluca Mayor María Elena Barrera Tapia of the PRI and former federal deputies Mely Romero Celis of the PRI, Alejandra Barrales of the PRD, and Teresa Jiménez Esquivel of the PAN. Under Mexico's election code, two seats are allocated to the party that wins the Senate elections and another to the runner-up. The remaining 32 seats are distributed to the parties based on the percentage of votes received in the federal elections.

A handful of prominent women politicians will serve in the Senate through an at-large position, including former Zacatecas governor Amalia García and ex-federal deputy Dolores Padierna of the PRD; and former federal deputy and gubernatorial candidate Luisa María Calderón of the PAN.

Calderón, the sister of President Felipe Calderón, lost the Michoacán gubernatorial election by a narrow margin last November ([SourceMex, Nov. 16, 2011](#)).

Some observers pointed out that only a handful of women who will serve in the Chamber of Deputies in 2012-2015 belong to an important category—the segment of the population that is under 30 years of age. Nayeli Yoval, coordinator of Elige, a civil group that promotes the sexual and reproductive rights of youth, said the increase in young deputies—14 women and eight men—is a byproduct of the gender-equity law.

Inequity persists in state legislatures

Despite the gender-equity advances in the federal Chamber of Deputies and Senate, representation in state legislatures leaves much to be desired. "It's almost as if the political parties decided to meet quotas at the federal level in exchange for ignoring the state elections," the CEAMEG report noted. "Very few women were elected at the state level, mainly because there were very few women candidates."

The CEAMEG report cited the example of Jalisco state, where only three of the 14 members elected to the state legislature via direct vote are women. In Colima, Nuevo León, and Baja California Sur, none of the candidates seeking office was a woman. The gender gap was also wide in some large states, including Mexico City, México state, Puebla, and Guanajuato.

The solution, said CEAMEG, is to seek legislation at the state level that mirrors the federal policy. This would open the door for more women to seek office in state legislatures, said the center.

"We have yet to reach a goal of 30% of women in most state legislatures," said CEAMEG. The center noted, however, that seven states are above the threshold—Campeche, Chihuahua, Puebla, Sinaloa, Tamaulipas, Veracruz, and Yucatán.

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