

Electoral institutions, women's representation, and policy outcomes (July 2021, with Ayumi Sudo)

Abstract

Do electoral institutions affect the degree to which female legislators address women's interests in legislative processes? While the growing literature has examined whether increased women's representation causally affects policy outcomes, whether electoral institutions mediate the effect is less known. To fill the gap, this study tests whether proportional representation (PR) encourages female representatives to address women-specific interests more than a single-member district (SMD) does. To elicit the causal impact of electoral institutions, we leverage the unique "best loser" provision of the mixed electoral system in the Japanese House of Representatives elections, where a marginal candidate may win an SMD seat or PR seat by chance. To fully account for the complex structure of the mixed electoral system, we apply the simulation-based regression discontinuity design. Across different legislative activities, we consistently find a significant effect of holding a PR seat: female PR representatives more frequently affiliate with women-related committees, submit question memorandums on women's issues, and endorse petitions regarding women's interests than their male counterparts, but significantly less so when they stand as SMD representatives. The institutional effect likely arises because a female PR representative, who represents a larger district with other co-partisans, has greater incentives to prioritize women-related interests to distinguish herself from her co-partisans. Our results suggest that electoral institutions do affect the relationship between women's nominal representation and their policy consequences. More broadly, our findings bring forward the research agenda in political economics to better understand the political institutions and policy choices and, in particular, underscore the importance of institutional environments in leveraging diverse voices in policymaking.