



# A Decade of Progress: Increased Representation of Women in the National Parliaments of Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica

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**Abstract:** Women in Latin America are rapidly moving up the political ladder against the odds. Currently, the regional average for women serving in the lower chambers of parliament in Latin America exceeds the worldwide average. In slightly over one decade, the percentage of women serving in the lower chambers of Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica increased by large margins (IPU, 2012). While numerous factors can possibly explain this increase, this paper examines three political factors that may help to explain the increased presence of women serving in the national parliaments of Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica from 2001 to 2012. Using the comparative analysis approach, this work investigates each country based on: 1) the role and influence of feminist groups; 2) the adoption and implementation of gender quotas; 3) the country's level of democracy. The findings indicate that all three political factors have some influence on the presence of women in parliament.

**Key words:** women lawmakers; parliament; Latin American politicians

*"No country will reach its potential unless it draws on the talents of our wives, mothers, and our sisters and daughters"*

(U.S. President, Barack Obama)

## Introduction

In recent years, scholars, journalists, and bloggers have devoted considerable attention to the obstacles and societal barriers women face when running for public office in Latin American countries. Given its history as a region rife with governmental corruption, longstanding dictatorships, and a deep devotion to Catholicism, the status of women in the political arenas in Latin American countries is worthy of inquiry.

In a 2011 survey entitled "Unseeing Eyes: Media Coverage and Gender in Latin American Elections<sup>1</sup>" published by the U.N. Women and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), three major hurdles were

<sup>1</sup> Torregrosa's study "covers five countries in Latin America and identifies differences and inequalities that women candidates face in media coverage before elections.

found to impede women’s pursuit to public office: lack of access to money; media bias; and “a culture that treat women as second class citizens” (Torregrosa, 2012). “Women in Politics—Is there Progress in Latin America?” also published by IDEA chronicled, “Women in Latin America continue to make political gains but they are still far from reaching parity with men in terms of political representation” (IDEA, 2012). Yet another article headlined that in Latin America “political gender equality remains an uphill battle and it is a long road ahead” (Clark, 2012).

Despite the vast systemic political, socio-economic and cultural barriers women face in Latin America when seeking political office, the ‘region as a whole’ is making marked progress in the share of women serving in national parliaments, although a few countries ‘within the region’ remain stagnant and have made only marginal gains.<sup>2</sup>

In a, *New York Times* article, “Latin America Opens Up to Equality,” Luisita Torregrosa underscores the progress made within the region writing, “Quietly and against the odds, women are stepping up the political ladder in Latin America, moving ahead of the United States when it comes to political empowerment and closely matching much of Western Europe” (2012). More recently, Paxton and Hughes (2013) notes that Latin America leads the world in the number of countries that have elected female presidents or prime ministers [See Table 1]. Numerous political, socio-economic, and cultural factors may help to explain women’s progress within the region.

Table 1. *Female Presidents, Prime Ministers and Heads of State in Latin America*

Name	Country	Year she took Office	Post
Isabel Peron	Argentina	1974	President
Lidia Gueiler Tejada	Bolivia	1979	Prime Minister
Violeta Chamoro	Nicaragua	1990	President
Mireya Moscoso	Panama	1999	President
Beatriz Merino	Peru	2003	Prime Minister
Michelle Bachelet	Chile	2006	President
Cristina F. de Kirchner	Argentina	2007	President
Laura Chinchilla	Costa Rica	2010	President
Dilma Rouseff	Brazil	2010	President

Source: [http://www.squidoo.com/women-presidents-women-prime-ministers#quizmod\\_answers\\_1574980](http://www.squidoo.com/women-presidents-women-prime-ministers#quizmod_answers_1574980)

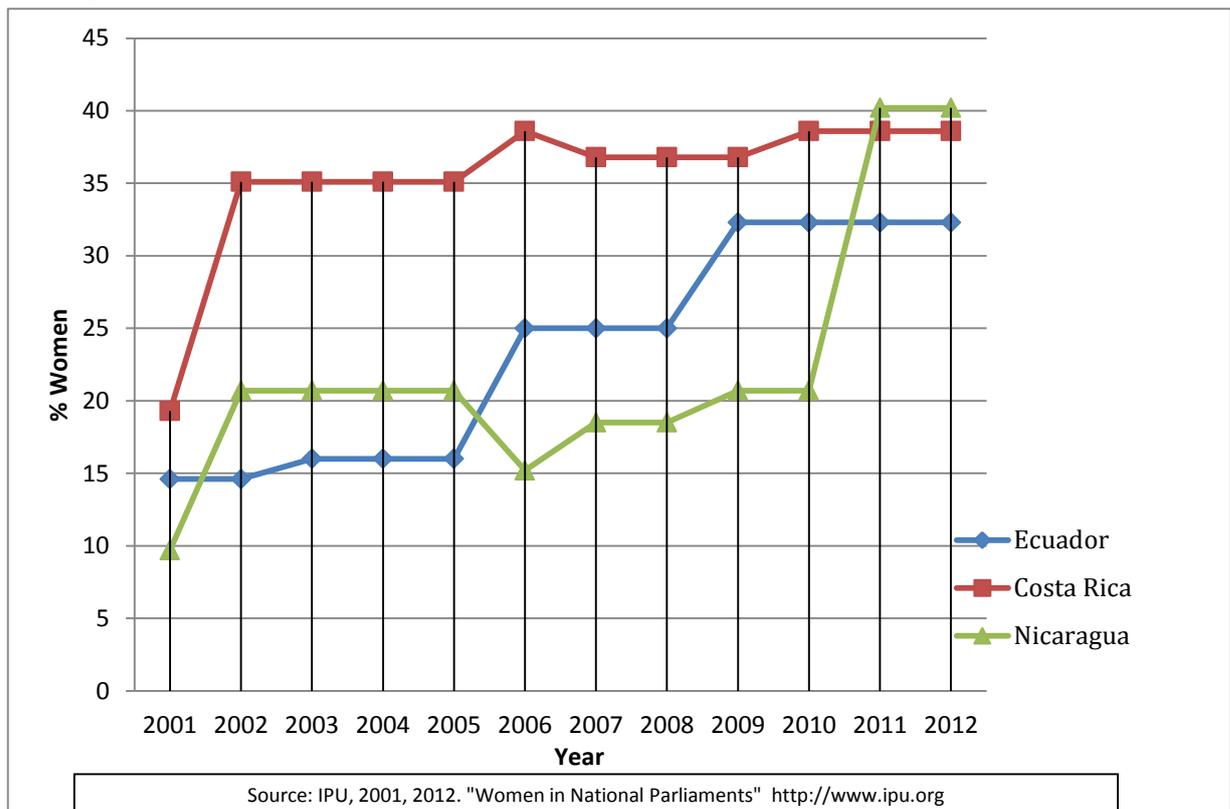
Luisita Lopez Torregrosa, 2012; Adams, 2012).

*Note:* Rosalia Arteaga was sworn in as Ecuador’s President in 1997. She stepped down two days later. Ecuador’s President for two days in 1997.

<sup>2</sup>According to Adams (2012), Panama is the only country where female membership decreased from 2001-2011. However, in Brazil, Chile, Guatemala, and Uruguay the increase is marginal with less than 4% over the entire decade (Adams, 2012; IPU, 2001, 2011).

Using a comparative analysis research approach, this research explores political factors that may help to explain the increased presence of women in three Latin America parliaments from 2001 to 2012. The three countries were chosen because of their considerable increase in women in slightly over a decade. The three countries include Nicaragua whose percentage of women in parliament increased from 9.7% in 2001 to 40.2% in 2012. Costa Rica, Nicaragua’s neighboring country to the South, increased its female share of parliamentarians from 19.3% in 2001 to 38.6% in 2012 and Ecuador increased its share of women in parliament from 14.6 percent to 32.3% over the eleven year period [See Table 2](IPU, 2012).

Table 2. % seats held by women in National Parliament in Ecuador, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua 2001 - 2012



In a previous work on Latin America, I employed a regression analysis to determine the combined effects of political, socio-economic and cultural explanatory variables on the percentage of women in the lower chambers of nineteen Latin American parliaments. The findings suggest that political and socio-economic factors affect women’s share of seats in Latin American parliaments, but cultural factors do not (Adams, 2012a). Specifically, the presence of legislative quotas, a high percentage of women in the adult labor force, education and a country’s degree of democratic rights and freedoms were found to significantly impact the percentage of women serving in the parliaments of Latin America (Adams, 2012a).

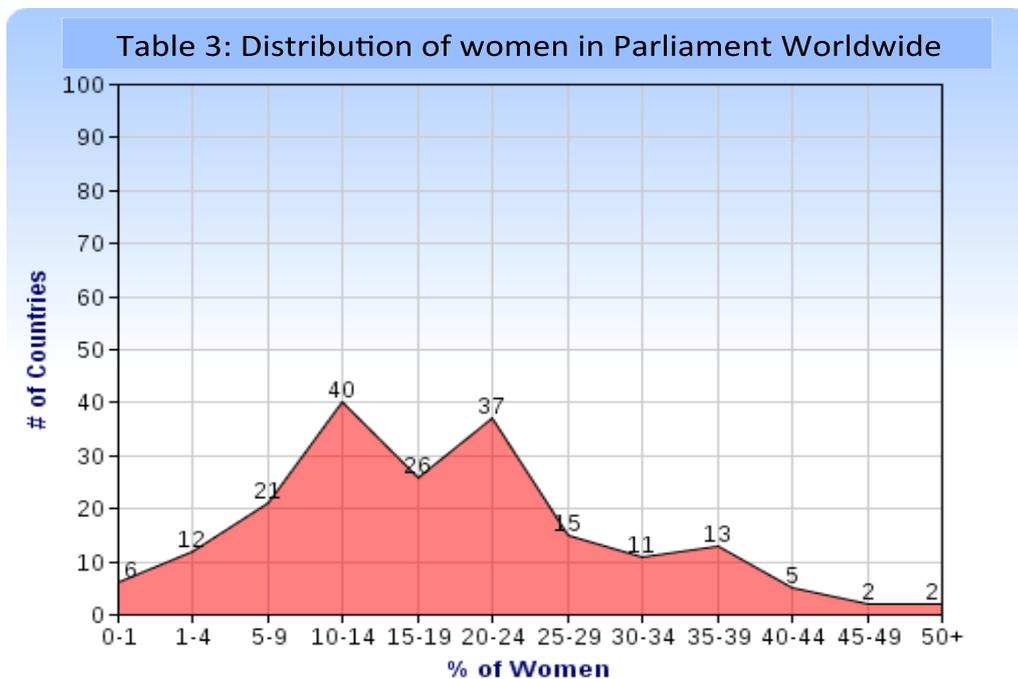
The current work employs a comparative analysis to examine more closely three political factors that may affect the share of women serving in the national parliaments of Ecuador Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. Unlike my previous work on the topic that also included socio-economic and cultural factors, this work only

examines political factors. The role and increased presence of women’s activist/ feminist organizations, the adoption and implementation of gender quotas, and the degree of democratic freedoms may provide the most compelling reasons for the marked increase in the percentage of women in the three Latin American countries under study over an eleven year period.

**Women in Parliament Worldwide:  
Factors that Influence Representation**

As of February 1, 2013, the average percentage of women serving in the lower chamber of national parliaments worldwide was 20.8%,<sup>3</sup> with forty countries having only 10-14% women and thirty-seven countries with 20-25% (IPU, 2013)[See Table 3]. The African nation of Rwanda leads all nations with 56.3% women in parliament, followed closely by Andorra<sup>4</sup>, a landlocked, microstate in Southeastern Europe, with 50% female representation. The Middle Eastern nation of Yemen ranks among the six states with 0-1% female representation, with 0.3%<sup>5</sup> [See Table 3].

Table 3. *Distribution of women in Parliament Worldwide*



Data from Inter-Parliamentary Union (2013).

In Latin America, the regional average for women serving in the lower chambers of parliament is 23.3%<sup>6</sup>, which exceeds the worldwide average of 20.8%. Nicaragua, a country where women made up 30% of the revolutionary army in 1979, is the highest ranked Latin American nation and is among five countries worldwide within the 40-44% women range, with 40.2% (Paxton & Hughes, 2013). Panama and Brazil ranked among the lowest Latin American countries with 8.6%

<sup>3</sup> This average is based on information on the national parliaments in 190 countries as of February 1, 2013 (IPU, 2013)

<sup>4</sup> Andorra is located in the eastern Pyrenees Mountains and bordered by Spain and France.

<sup>5</sup> Only 1 of Yemen’s 301 seats in its lower chamber of parliament is held by a woman.

<sup>6</sup> This percentage is based on the share of women in the lower chambers of parliament in the following countries: Argentina; Bolivia; Brazil; Chile; Colombia; Costa Rica; Cuba; Dominican Republic; Ecuador; El Salvador; Guatemala; Honduras; Mexico; Nicaragua; Panama; Paraguay; Peru; Uruguay; Venezuela.

and 8.5%, respectively (IPU, 2013) and they are among the twenty-one countries that have 5-9% women in parliament [See Table 3]. This disparity of representation among women in national parliaments is rooted in a wide range of political, socio-economic and cultural factors noted by scholars on women and politics.

Cross-national works that have investigated factors that influence female representation have found that a country's electoral system (Kenworthy & Malami, 1999; Matland, 1998; Rule, 1987); access to education (Paxton & Hughes, 2013; Adams, 2012b); the share of women in a country's paid labor force and occupations such as law (Arceneaux, 2001); cultural links between former colonies and their formal colonial rulers (Paxton & Hughes, 2013); religion (Paxton & Kunovich, 2003; Paxton, 1997); a country's threshold of economic development (Adams, 2012b; Matland, 1998); left party government (Kenworthy & Malami, 1999); the timing of female suffrage (Kenworthy & Malami, 1999); the share of women in professional occupations (Kenworthy & Malami, 1999); the existence of gender quotas and external global forces that influence quota adoption (Adams 2012a; Krook, 2009; Ertan, 2011); the existence of free and fair elections (Paxton and Hughes, 2013; Paxton, 1997); opportunities for ethnic minorities (Adams, 2011; Paxton, 1997); when and whether a country ratified CEDAW (Adams, 2011; Kenworthy & Malami, 1999); global pressure for the inclusion of women in international politics (Paxton, Hughes & Green, 2006) have significantly impacted the presence of women in a country's national parliament.

### **Political Factors that Influence Female Representation**

In Latin America, political factors seem to have the greatest influence on the share of women in the political arena. The adoption and implementation of gender quotas remains one of the most influential factors for the increased presences of women in parliaments. In many instances, the intense pressure from feminist organizations has often led governments to adopt quotas and gender-sensitive legislation promoting women's equality.

A second political factor responsible for the increase in female parliamentarians in Latin America is the rise and influence of feminist organizations. Over the past two decades, "the proliferation of organized efforts by non-state actors, especially women, is changing the very nature of the state itself" (Markowitz & Tice, 2002: 941). The increased presence of non-governmental organizations (NGO's)<sup>7</sup> has precipitated a change in the nature of the state by moving feminist concerns into the political mainstream.

The final political factor that has contributed to the increased presence of women in the political arena in Latin America is governmental transitions from autocratic rule/ military authoritarianism towards more democratic forms of government.<sup>8</sup> Since gaining their independence at the beginning of the 19th century, the Latin American states have tried to establish democratic regimes. However, the transition has not proceeded smoothly across the region.

The primary goal of the current research is to explore the aforementioned political factors in Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. Women are more likely to

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<sup>7</sup> "Localized and professionalized social service organizations form the core of feminist civil society. . . NGOs initially developed as autonomous organizations during and immediately after the Velvet Revolutions that led to the collapse of state socialism...Most continue to engage in at least some political advocacy for women's rights, but focusing on social service provisioning, they function as both social movement organizations and NGOs" (Guenther, 2011: 863).

<sup>8</sup> Women were an active part of the guerrilla warfare and political uprisings that swept Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s. By the late 1970s, across the region, 'women of all social classes defied their historical exclusion from things political and joined the opposition in unprecedented numbers'" (Paxton and Hughes, 2013: 293).

be present in the legislatures of countries where there is a strong presence of feminist advocacy and organizations, where gender quotas are present and where citizens are afforded higher levels of democratic rights and freedoms, than in countries where civil rights and liberties, and public demonstrations and discourse is repressed (Adams, 2012a; Kenworthy & Malami, 1999).

Table 4. *Political Factors & Women in the Parliaments of Nicaragua, Costa Rica, & Ecuador*

	Nicaragua	Costa Rica	Ecuador
Percent Women 2001 <sup>a</sup>	9.7%	19.3%	14.6%
Percent Women 2012 <sup>b</sup>	40.2%	38.6%	32.3%
Presence of Feminist Org	Yes	Yes	Yes
Dominant Quota Types	Voluntary Party	Legislated <sup>c</sup>	Legislated <sup>d</sup>
Level of Democracy	Hybrid Regime	Full Democracy	Hybrid Regime

<sup>a</sup> IPU, 2001 <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>.

<sup>b</sup> IPU, 2012 <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>

<sup>c</sup> A new electoral law (no 8765) approved in Sept. 2009 states the principle of parity for all elections after 2010.

<sup>d</sup> In the 2008 constitution, 50-50 gender parity and alternation between men and women on the candidate lists was approved

### **Women's Advocacy Groups in Latin America**

Over the last three decades, women's groups in Latin America have established nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to pursue feminist agendas. "These women NGO's organized into issue networks or coalitions to change laws, influence policy and acquire additional rights, particularly in the areas of domestic violence and reproductive and sexual health" (Paxton & Hughes, 2013: 299). Pressure from feminist organizations to adopt gender sensitive policies with regard to violence against women proved successful in Nicaragua, Brazil, Peru, Costa Rica, and Mexico (Paxton & Hughes, 2013). "In Venezuela, intense mobilization by women during the drafting of the 1999 Constitution led to the inclusion of gender-sensitive language, numerous references to women's equality and citizenship, as well as concrete rights for mothers, such as social security benefits for housework" (299). Unfortunately, the adoption of such policies, rarely guarantees immediate compliance.

In some countries, women paid steep prices for their advocacy for equality and in some instances, the oppressive regimes of Latin America proved to be highly abusive toward women. Women were beaten, raped, abandoned, impoverished, tortured, and killed under the repressive dictatorships and subsequent revolutionary struggles of Latin America (294). Despite this egregious abuse under autocratic rule, women became "competent activists" and essential participants in the revolutionary movements that helped to transition much of the region away from the horrors of brutal dictators towards more democratic governments (294).

Both Michelle Bachelet, former president of Chile, and Dilma Rousseff, current president of Brazil, "were deeply involved in their country's democratization movements and were both arrested and tortured during the

struggle" (294). The participation of women in the democratization efforts in many Latin American countries did not ensure "formal political participation in the newly democratic regime" (300). This realization caused many women to become fierce advocates for women's equality and they utilized their experiences and leadership skills gained in guerilla warfare to organize feminist organizations. The hardline stance taken by feminist groups for the inclusion of women into the decision-making process within their countries led governments to adopt policies that reflected their sentiments.

### **Feminist Advocacy/Gender- Sensitive Policies in Ecuador, Nicaragua & Costa Rica**

#### ***Ecuador***

Ecuador established a series of gender-sensitive policies and organizations devoted to gender equity from 1996 to 2001 (Vega, 2004) in response to the historic 1995 Beijing Platform for Action which called on "governments to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making" (Htun, 2002:8). The National Council for Women (now CONAMU) was created by a Constitutional mandate and served as "the governing body for policies on the promotion and protection of women's human rights and gender equality" (Ecuador CEDAW Report, 2007: 5). The National Council for Women with the participation of the national women's movement established the Equal Opportunity Plan that incorporated Ecuador's commitments that emerged from the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (Ecuador CEDAW Report, 2003).

Other feminist organizations in Ecuador devoted to women's equality include the National Congressional Committee on Women and the Family, and the Office of the Assistant Director for Women and Children in the Office of the Ombudsman (Vega, 2004). Several regional and local offices were created to reinforce Ecuador's commitment to the inclusion of women, made at the national level. The enormous popularity and the "marked ability of the NGOs to access resources and influence mainstream policy, has led to what Sonia Alvarez (1998: 306) termed the 'NGOization'<sup>9</sup> of Latin American feminism" (Guenther, 2011: 863).

The 1998 Constitution helped to solidify "the institutional status of gender issues" in Ecuador (Vega, 2004). "The 1998 Constitution converted the demands of women into guaranteed rights. It incorporated throughout its entire text gender issues and the protection of women human rights" (Garces, 2005).

#### ***Nicaragua***

Much like the women of Ecuador, women in Nicaragua have long been socially and politically active. The massive participation of women in the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship was "unprecedented not just for Nicaragua, but for Western hemisphere" (Chinchilla, 1990: 374). The goal of women's participation in the 1974 opposition movement with the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSNL) proved to be twofold: 1). to overthrow its brutal Somoza regime, and 2). to advance gender equality. The Somoza regime was overthrown in 1979; and on March 8, 1987, International Women's Day, FSLN made its first programmatic statement highlighting the historic commitment the FSLN made to combating discrimination against women and the important role women played in

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<sup>9</sup> Alvarez defines 'NGOization' as "national and global neo-liberalism's active promotion and official sanctioning of particular organizational forms and practices among feminist organizations and other sectors of civil society" (Guenther, 2011: 863).

the overthrow of the dictatorship. The statement also discussed the progress made on behalf of Nicaraguan women since 1979 (Chinchilla, 370).

After Nicaragua's new government was formed in the aftermath of the revolution, women comprised of "31.4% of government leadership positions, 67% of Sandinista Defense Committees, and 26.8% of FSLN membership" (371). Women's heroic involvement in the revolution and FSLN's commitment to gender equality fostered the formation numerous feminist organizations in Nicaragua.

In 1977, the Association of Women Confronting the National Problem (AMPRONAC) was formed with a mission to bring together women from different social classes and communities to advocate for a common cause--- human rights for all. AMPRONAC advanced the idea that a woman's place was not just in the home or private sphere, but also in the public sphere if she so chooses (Chinchilla, 1990). In 1979, AMPORNAC became the Luisa Amanda Espinoza Association of Nicaraguan Women (AMNLAE)<sup>10</sup> and by 1981, boasted a membership of 25,000 women. Other groups that advocated on behalf of women were the Nicaraguan Pro-Life Association (ANPROVIDA), the Women's Network against Violence, Colectivo de Mujeres de Matagalpa (Matagalpa women's Collective), the Centro de Mujeres de Masaya (Masaya Women's Center), Puntos de Encuentro, the Centro de Mujeres IXCHEN (IXCHEN Women's Center), and the Partido de la Izquierda Erotica (Party of the Erotic Left—PIE) (Kampwirth, 2008).

The feminist movement in Nicaragua seemed to be moving in a positive direction, at least until the 1990 election when Daniel Ortega, a close ally to FSLN, lost the presidency to the National Opposition Union's (UNO) candidate, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro. As a candidate de Chamorro promised to "overturn the revolutionary policies, and thus, return women to their traditional gender roles—inside the home" (Kampwirth, 2008: 127). Due to the economic problems of Nicaragua with record levels inflation at "33,000%," de Chamorro implemented an austerity program to reduce inflation (Chinchilla, 1990: 390). Many of the programs cut were programs implemented by the prior Sandinista government that benefited women such as day care centers, domestic violence shelters and programs. Despite this setback, the women's movement in Nicaragua gained its momentum again in later years, much of the discussion centered on the single issue of abortion rights.

### ***Costa Rica***

The Feminist Movement in Costa Rica is captured in a 1997 book entitled, *A Reader on the Process of Organizing and Empowering Costa Rican Women* edited by Ilse Leitinger. The *Reader* attributes the success of the Costa Rican women's movement to both domestic and international factors including women's groups at universities, government bureaucracies within the country, and "outside assistance from NGOs and nations like Holland" (Padula, 1998). The Women's Liberation Movement (MLM), created in 1974, was one of the first feminist groups in Costa Rica. The MLM's first tackled issues surrounding women's reproductive rights: "contraception, abortion, and the banning of forced sterilization" and they later successfully defeated a bill that would prohibit intrauterine devices (IUDs) (Leitinger, 1997:19). In 1981, MLM changed its name to the Centro Feminista de Informacion Accion (CEFEMINA).

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<sup>10</sup> "AMNLAE's work included advocating legal changes to help women and providing services through casa de la mujer (women's houses). These centers provided services in the areas of health, legal counseling, psychological counseling and offered workshops on topic such as sexuality, contraception, and job training (Kampwirth, 2008: 125).

Much like the NGO's and feminist organizations in Ecuador and Nicaragua, CEFEMINA developed programs in Costa Rica that aided women on issues relating to health services, education, maternity, domestic violence, and "income generation for women" (21). CEFEMINA remains a strong advocate on behalf of Costa Rican women continues to seek to forge new partnerships with groups who work with and for women (22).

Another well-known feminist organization in Costa Rica is Alianza. It is one of the oldest women's organizations in Central America dedicated to equality and the eradication of oppression and paternalism. There are numerous feminist organizations within Costa Rica that have played a major role in the advancement of women in the region. In 2002, at least 26 grassroots organizations (i.e., nongovernmental, non-international) devoted to women's issues had developed since 1985, many of them addressing women's health (Noonan, 2002). Today, that number has probably doubled.

### **Gender Quotas in Latin America**

A second political factor that has been found to significantly influence the share of women in parliament is the adoption and implementation of gender quotas. Gender quotas are an integral part of women's political advancement in Latin America (Paxton and Hughes, 2013). In 2010, Htun and Piscopo found that "the influence of gender quotas outweigh every other factor in producing women's formal political representation in Latin America" (301).

The most generally recognized quotas include: legislative or election law quotas, constitutional/reserved seats quotas and political party quotas.<sup>11</sup> Legislative or election law quotas are the most prevalent in the Latin American region. These election law quotas "apply to all political parties within a country rather than just select political parties" (301).

Argentina became the first country worldwide to adopt gender quotas in 1991, to increase its share of women in politics. The Argentine law requires that the party electoral lists have a minimum of 30 percent women among their candidates for all national elections, and maintains that party lists that fail to comply with the electoral laws will not be approved (IDEA, Argentina).

Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Venezuela adopted gender quotas between 1991 and 2000 (Htun, 2002; Zetterberg, 2009). The quotas laws ranged from a 20% minimum for women in Paraguay, to a 40 percent minimum in Costa Rica with most countries opting for a 30% minimum quota for women (Adams 2012a).

At the end of 2012, Costa Rica, Argentina, Mexico and Ecuador ranked among the top twenty-six countries worldwide, with the highest share of women in parliament. Nicaragua is among the seven<sup>12</sup> Latin American countries that have been reluctant to adopt quota laws for women (Htun, 2002).

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<sup>11</sup> "Legislative or Election law quotas are quotas that are provided for in the national legislation or regulations of the country. Constitutional quotas are quota provisions that are mandated in basic laws, usually the constitution of a country. Political Party quotas are voluntary rules or targets, set by political parties to include a certain percentage of women as election candidates" (IDEA, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Chile, Uruguay, Columbia, Cuba, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua have not adopted gender quotas in Latin America.

## **Gender Quotas in Ecuador, Nicaragua & Costa Rica**

### ***Ecuador***

Ecuador's 1998 Constitution included the gender quota provision that was adopted in 1997 that required a minimum level of 20% for women's participation as candidates in legislative election (Htun, 2002:7; Zetterberg, 2009). In 2000, Ecuador's minimum quota law increased to 30% for women. In 2008 Ecuador adopted a Constitutional mandate of 50-50 gender parity and alternation<sup>13</sup> between men and women on the candidate lists in its unicameral legislature. After the April 2009 election, the first to be held under the newest constitutional mandate, the percentage of women serving in parliament in Ecuador rose 4.7% from 27.6% in 2008, to 32.3% (IPU, 2008, 2009; IDEA, 2013)

The positive impact of Ecuador's 2008 50-50 gender parity quota law on women in parliament is apparent in its most recent election. In February 2013, Ecuador elected its first woman speaker of parliament, Gabriela Rivadenira and two female deputy-speakers. Rivadenira is a member of Ecuador's ruling party, PAIS Alliance, and at the age of 29, is the youngest speaker of parliament in Latin America (IPU Briefing Room, 2013). As a result of the 2013 elections, women now comprise of 40 percent of the MPs in the Ecuadorian parliament (IPU Briefing Room, 2013).

### ***Nicaragua***

While Nicaragua has not adopted legislated gender quotas, the political parties have voluntarily adopted gender quotas. The Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN) has a 30% quota for women. The Liberal and Constitutionalist Party (PLC) has a "combined 40% quota for women and youth on electoral lists" (IDEA, 2013). The Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS) maintains that candidate lists must consist of at least 40% women and men, respectively (IDEA, 2013) Nicaragua's efforts to establish a proportional percentage of women and men to positions on the electoral lists [by the political parties], seems to have a positive influence on the percentage of women serving in its national parliament. While legislative or election law quotas are often viewed as most effective (when all things are considered, i.e.,- a country's electoral system, tough penalties for non-compliance), voluntary political party quotas seems to be working well in Nicaragua, although there are no penalties for non-compliance with the voluntary quotas.

### ***Costa Rica***

Almost a dozen Latin American countries have successfully pressured their governments to institute gender quotas for women in politics, nonetheless, scholars deem Costa Rica to be one of two<sup>14</sup> countries in Latin America with the most successful legislative quotas (Krook, 2007). Costa Rica's parliament adopted a 40% quota law in 1996 to ensure female representation (Krook, 2007). Due to pressure from women's organizations and party elites, in 1999, Costa Rica revised its quota provisions to include formal requirements regarding the placement of women on party lists and stiff penalties for non-compliance (Krook, 2007).

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<sup>13</sup> "The Constitution maintains that "the slates shall be established in an egalitarian fashion with a sequence of women, man or man, women until the total number of candidates has been completed" (IDEA, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Argentina, the first country worldwide to adopt gender quotas in 1991, has also succeeded in its implementation of quotas.

In 2009, Costa Rica once again revised its quota laws stating that “all nominations for elections must comply with the rules of parity and alteration, i.e., 50% of the candidates must be each gender and that two persons of the same sex cannot be subsequently included on the list of candidates” (IDEA, 2013). Failure to comply at both the national and sub-national level would result in the electoral authorities rejecting the party lists.

Voluntary Party Quotas are also in place in Costa Rica. The different parties vary with regard to the quotas adopted. The Christian-Social Unity Party (PUSC) states that no more than 60% of its members shall be of the same gender, with men and women serving as alternating candidates on electoral lists. The Citizen Action Party (PAC) contends that 50% of their candidates must be women, placed every second place on electoral lists (IDEA, 2013). The National Liberation Party (PLN) requires the representation of at least 40% for each gender and the alternation of men and women candidates on electoral lists. The Libertarian Movement Party (PML) requires that 40% of the seats to be allocated, in a possible government of the Libertarian Movement Party, be held by women, who must be placed in electable positions.

While gender quotas have increased the presence of women in legislatures worldwide, “evidence from Costa Rica suggest that to achieve optimal effectiveness, quota legislation must require political parties to place a minimum percentage of women on their lists, as well as mandate these placements be in electable positions (Jones, 2004). Despite women’s relevant political success in countries that have adopted and implemented quotas worldwide, there is still much debate among scholars regarding the constitutionality and continued use of quotas, the forms that quotas should take and their overall effectiveness in getting equitable outcomes for women in politics and in society (Adams, 2012a, b).

### **Democracy in Latin America**

A third political factor that has routinely been found to significantly impact the share of women in a country’s parliament is the degree of political rights and freedoms within a nation (Adams, 2012a,b; ; Paxton & Kunovich, 2003; Kenworthy & Malami, 1999). Women are more likely to be politically active in countries where they are afforded more rights and freedoms than in countries where those rights are restricted (Reynolds, 1999, Kenworthy & Malami, 1999). Latin American countries vary widely with regard to levels of democracy. The *Economist Index of Democracy* (2012) rates each country on 60 indicators grouped into five major categories—the electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties. The countries are categorized into four regime types: full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid regimes, and authoritarian regimes.<sup>15</sup>

The 2012 study categorizes Uruguay, the highest ranked country within the region with a global ranking of 18<sup>th</sup>, as a full democracy, while Cuba with the lowest global ranking for the region at 127 is categorized as an authoritarian regime (Economist Index, 2012). Costa Rica, a country where women gained the right to vote in 1949, is categorized as a full democracy, and is thus a nation where the basic political freedoms and civil liberties of Costa Rican citizens are respected, and where the political culture is conducive to the flourishing democracy (2012).

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<sup>15</sup> “Each category has a rating on a 0 to 10 scale, and the overall index of democracy is the simple average of the five categories” (The Economist Index, 2012; <http://www.eiu.com/Handlers/WhitepaperHandler.ashx?fi=Democracy-Index-2012.pdf&mode=wp&campaignid=DemocracyIndex12>) See descriptions of regime types at the aforementioned link.

Also in Costa Rica, the functioning of government is satisfactory, the media are independent and diverse, there is an effective system of checks and balances and there is judicial independence (2012). In an authoritarian regime like Cuba there is an absence of free and fair elections, a disregard for the abuses and infringement of civil liberties, a state-owned media with high levels of censorship and a judiciary that lacks independence. Fortunately, Cuba is the sole Latin American country categorized as an authoritarian regime by the *Economist Index*.

Ecuador and Nicaragua are categorized as hybrid regimes whereby "elections have substantial irregularities that prevent them from being free and fair, corruption tends to be widespread and the rule of law is weak, civil society is weak and the judiciary is not independent" (2012:29). "Despite progress in Latin American democratization in recent decades, many countries in the region have fragile democracies. Levels of political participation are generally low and democratic cultures are weak" and in recent years there has been an erosion of media freedoms (Economist Index, 2012: 8).

Despite being categorized as hybrid regimes, Ecuador and Nicaragua, like Costa Rica has made the election of female parliamentarians a priority within their respective nations. A closer examination of each country's commitment to democratic ideals of individual liberty, freedom and equality, should provide further insight into the role that democratization, may play as a political factor, in the increased presence of women in parliament from 2001-2012.

### **Levels of Democracy in Ecuador, Nicaragua & Costa Rica**

#### ***Ecuador***

From 1995-2005, Ecuador endured great political instability that led to the establishment of three governments in five years. As a result, democratic institutions were severely impaired leaving only remnants of the free exercise of human rights, with "women and their families being the hardest hit" (Vega, 2004). Vega maintains that "despite the ungovernable state of the country, significant progress was made in terms of recognition of women's rights and government policies on gender issues" (2004).

In 2012, Ecuador ranked 87<sup>th</sup> out of 165 countries by the *Economist Index of Democracy*. Ecuador's overall index democracy score was 5.78 (out of ten). Of the five categories, Ecuador received its highest scores in the categories for its electoral process and pluralism 7.83 (out of ten), and guaranteeing civil liberties to its citizens, receiving a score of 7.06 (out of ten). Essentially, this means that elections in Ecuador tend to be free from government intrusion and that the electors are free to vote and are offered a range of choices, and that there are no major irregularities in the voting process (at least in the elections for national legislatures and head of government). Further, citizens are free to express their views and religious opinions and protest. The two categories where Ecuador received the lowest scores are in the areas of its democratic political culture receiving a score of 4.38 (out of ten) and its functioning of government 4.64 (out of ten).

Table 5. Ecuador's Democracy Index Scores

Ecuador	Democracy Index Score
<b>Electoral Process</b>	7.83
<b>Functioning Gov.</b>	4.64
<b>Pol. Participation</b>	5.00
<b>Pol. Culture</b>	4.38
<b>Civil Liberties</b>	7.06
<b>Overall Score</b>	5.78

According to the *Democracy Index*, a country's democratic political culture is flawed when a culture of passivity and apathy, an obedient and docile citizenry is present (2012: 27). Given its history of autocratic rule, it is no wonder that citizens opt to obey strong leadership in Ecuador. In the area of functioning of government, Ecuador routinely has problems implementing democratically-based decisions (2012: 27). In the final category of political participation, Ecuador received a score of 5.00 (out of ten). This means that citizens have been reluctant to fully participate in public debate, elect representatives and join political parties (2012: 28).

Nicaragua, like Ecuador, was also categorized as a hybrid regime by the *2012 Economist Index*, and is ranked 92<sup>nd</sup> out of 165 countries, trailing five countries behind Ecuador. Nicaragua's overall index democracy score was 5.56 (out of ten). Like Ecuador, Nicaragua received its highest scores in the categories of guaranteeing civil liberties to its citizens, receiving a score of 7.35 (out of ten) and for its electoral process and pluralistic culture, with a score of 6.58 (out of ten). Nicaragua's democratic political culture score of 5.63 (out of ten) is slightly higher than Ecuador's at 4.38 (out of ten). Nicaragua's received its two lowest rankings in the areas of the functioning of government 4.36 (out of ten) and political participation 3.89 (out of ten). The low rankings for the functioning of government and political participation indicate that like Ecuador, Nicaragua routinely has problems implementing democratically-based decisions (2012: 27) and citizens have been reluctant to fully participate in public debate, elect representatives and join political parties (2012: 28).

Table 6. Nicaragua's Democracy Index Scores

Nicaragua	Democracy Index Score
<b>Electoral Process</b>	6.58
<b>Functioning Gov.</b>	4.36
<b>Pol. Participation</b>	3.89
<b>Pol. Culture</b>	5.63
<b>Civil Liberties</b>	7.35
<b>Overall Score</b>	5.56

Unlike Ecuador and Nicaragua, Costa Rica is one of two<sup>16</sup> Latin American countries categorized by the *2012 Economist Index of Democracy* as a full democracy and it ranks twenty-second worldwide in guaranteeing its citizens basic political freedoms and civil liberties

(2012). Costa Rica's overall index score is 8.10 (out of ten), just one point behind twenty-first ranked United States of America at 8.11 (out of ten).

Costa Rica received its highest rankings in the areas of ensuring civil liberties to its citizens with a score of 9.71 (out of ten), and providing a highly effective electoral process and promoting pluralism (9.58 out of ten) within its borders. In a full democracy such as Costa Rica, "elections are free and fair, the constitutional mechanisms for the orderly transfer of power from one government to another is clear, established and accepted, and citizens have access to public office" (2012).

In the category of functioning of government, Costa Rica scored 8.21 (out of ten). In this area questions arise about government transparency, whether the freely elected representatives determine government policy, whether there are effective checks and balances on governmental decisions, and the public's confidence in the government. Costa Rica seems to be doing quite well in the area of the functioning of its government (Economist Index, 2012).

Table 7. *Costa Rica's Democracy Index Scores*

Costa Rica	Democracy Index Score
<b>Electoral Process</b>	9.58
<b>Functioning Gov.</b>	8.21
<b>Pol. Participation</b>	6.11
<b>Pol. Culture</b>	6.88
<b>Civil Liberties</b>	9.71
<b>Overall Score</b>	8.10

The two categories where Costa Rica received its lowest ranking is in the areas of democratic political culture with a score of 6.88 (out of ten) and political participation with a score of 6.11 (out of ten). Although these rankings are not high, Costa Rica seems to be doing well in its efforts to ensure its citizens a democratic political culture whereby, the citizens' perceptions of leadership and government are fair, and there is a high degree of popular support for democracy (Economist Index, 2012). Political participation in Costa Rica seems to be an area for improvement. While citizens usually turnout in large numbers for national elections, and they engage in politics through political parties, non-governmental organizations and in lawful demonstrations, more could be done in Costa Rica to promote citizens political participation.

### **Summary of Comparative Observations**

The increased presence and positioning of women in legislative bodies is often attributed to a number of political, socio-economic and cultural factors specific to a given country. For decades, feminist advocacy groups have been steadfast in their efforts to equalize the playing field for women, and, in many cases, their efforts have contributed to the share of women entering into and the

<sup>16</sup> Uruguay is also categorized as a full democracy by the *2012 Economist Index of Democracy*.

political arena. The adoption and implementation of gender quotas have also catapulted women into the bastions of power in national legislative bodies worldwide. However, the political landscape must be conducive to female representation, whereby elections are free and fair and citizens enjoy a heightened level of democratic rights. The adoption of gender quotas and the passage of gender-sensitive legislation have little value if the social and cultural climate for women within a country or region is not conducive to these policy goals.

In Latin America, women have made marked progress in joining the ranks of their male colleagues in national parliaments. This is certainly true for the countries of Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica.

Despite the apparent flaws in the democratic processes in Ecuador, the election of women to parliament seems to be important to leaders within the country. The adoption and the implementation of the 50-50 parity law in 2008 as a result of the actions of women advocacy groups, and the 2013 election of its first woman speaker of parliament and two female deputy-speakers demonstrates the country's commitment to gender equality. While it has yet to reach full gender parity, Ecuador is doing better than most countries with 32% women in its chamber as of May 2013. The adoption and implementation of gender quotas seems to be the most compelling reason for the increased presence of women in the Ecuadorian parliament from 2001-2012.

Nicaragua's failure to adopt and implement legislated gender quotas does not seem to have impeded the country's ability to send women to parliament. From 2001-2012, Nicaragua increased its share of women in parliament by 30.5% [See Table 4] (IPU, 2001; 2012). While a myriad of factors can potentially explain this phenomenon, the indomitable role of women in Nicaragua's democratization movement and the subsequent emergence of a plethora of strong feminist organizations seem to be the pivotal political factor for the ascension of women into public service.

Women have a long history of activism in Nicaragua and, therefore sought to make gender equality one of the defining goals of the 1974 opposition movement (Chinchilla, 1990). From the outset, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) embraced the idea of women's equality and made "the historic commitment to combating discrimination against women" that had been widely practiced under the oppressive Somoza dictatorship (Chinchilla, 1990: 371). After the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship in 1979, Nicaragua's new government appointed an appreciable number of women to government leadership positions and the feminist organizations helped to create an environment in Nicaragua where it is culturally acceptable for women to occupy the public sphere.

Perhaps the voluntary political party quotas adopted by three major political parties<sup>17</sup> in Nicaragua played a role in the increased presence of women in the Nicaraguan Parliament from 2001-2012. However, given that such quotas establish no penalties for non-compliance, it is difficult to discern their impact. Hence, it appears that the constant work of feminist organizations and their longstanding devotion to women's equality may be the single most influential political factor for Nicaragua's high percentage of women in parliament.

Costa Rica, the Latin American country that elected its first female parliamentarian in 1953 and elected its first female president, Laura Chinchilla, in 2010, has been praised for the political advancement of women within its borders

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<sup>17</sup> The three parties include: the Sandinista Front National Liberation (FSLN), the Liberal and Constitutionalist Party (PLC), and the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS) (IDEA, 2013).

(Paxton & Hughes, 2013; Krook, 2007). The adoption and implementation of gender quotas and its successful transformation from an autocratic regime to a 'full democracy' sets Costa Rica apart from other countries within the region.

Costa Rica first adopted its 40% gender quota for women in parliament in 1997 and has consistently revised and strengthened its quota laws over time to make them more effective. As a result, female parliamentarians now comprise of 38.6% of the national parliament and are making huge strides with regard to lawmaking (Paxton and Hughes, 2013).

Costa Rica's level of democratization is another area that sets it apart from other Latin American countries. Costa Rica eliminated its military rule in 1949 and created an "effective liberal-constitutional framework that ensure[d] its citizen's rights to popular sovereignty (Sayle & DeGennaro, 2008: 68). In a region rife with military coups and authoritarianism, Costa Rica is "exceptional for its governmental stability, suffering only two brief periods of war in its long democratic history" (Paxton and Hughes, 2013: 289). The *2012 Economist Index of Democracy* recognizes Costa Rica as a full democracy and notes that its major strengths lies in its ability to ensure civil liberties to its citizens and to provide a highly effective electoral process that promotes pluralism and inclusion within its borders. The[se] "constitutional rules against a politically active armed force have strengthened national faith in Costa Rican values of democracy" (Sayle & DeGennaro, 68).

While Costa Rican women owe much of their societal advancement to the feminist advocacy groups within the nation, the adoption and revised implementation of gender quotas coupled with its longstanding history of legal recognition of women's democratic rights before the law seems to be the most compelling political factors influencing the high percentage of women in parliament over the last decade. Early on, Costa Rica gave to its citizens the right to choose their leaders, more and more, the voters of Costa Rica are choosing female leaders.

### **Conclusion**

Numerous political, socio-economic and cultural factors impact the share of women in national parliaments worldwide. The purpose of this work was to use a comparative analysis to investigate political factors that may help to explain the marked increase in the percentage of women in the parliaments of Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica from 2001-2012. While not quantitative, and, thus, more speculative, the systematic comparison of the country's feminist advocacy groups and gender-sensitive legislation, the adoption and implementation of gender quotas and the democratic rights and freedoms afforded its citizens, does shed a positive light on the role that these political factors may have played in the increased presence of women in their respective parliaments in the years under study.

Given its history as a region rife with governmental corruption, longstanding dictatorships, and a deep devotion to Catholicism, the status of women in the political arenas in Latin American countries is certainly worthy of inquiry. In a few short decades, Latin America has overcome steep barriers that excluded women in the public sphere, to become the regional world leader in the number of countries that have elected female presidents or prime ministers.

In Ecuador, the adoption and the implementation of the 50-50 parity law in 2008 as a result of the fierce women advocacy groups, seems to be the most

compelling reason for the increased presence of women in the Ecuadorian parliament from 2001-2012. In Nicaragua, women's longstanding political involvement, first with the overthrow of the Somoza government and then with feminist organizations, may be the single most influential political factor for Nicaragua's high percentage of women in parliament. Finally, in Costa Rica, the adoption and revised implementation of 40% gender quotas, coupled with its longstanding history of legal recognition of women's democratic rights before the law, seems to be the most compelling political factors influencing the high percentage of women in parliament over the last decade.

While not perfect in its approach, this work does delve into three of the major political factors that influence female representation worldwide. Future works should include a cross-national quantitative approach to discern with greater certainty which political factors significantly impacts the percentage of women in parliament. Secondly, a discussion of socio-economic and cultural factors such as female access to education and the paid workforce, religion, the level of corruption and/or transparency in government, could enhance the scope of the research by providing more possible explanations for the increase presence of women in the parliaments of Latin America.

Despite the apparent shortcomings, the current research does demonstrate that Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica have all made the election of women to national parliaments, a major priority. This decade of progress with regard to women, should not be mired by the looming economic and societal challenges that continues to plague the region. Perhaps the election of more women within the region could help to curtail many of these problems.

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