

WINDOWS OF POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY: INSTITUTIONAL INSTABILITY AND GENDER INEQUALITY IN THE WORLD'S NATIONAL LEGISLATURES

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ABSTRACT

Although women remain underrepresented in national politics throughout the world, they have also made significant progress towards equality in recent decades. Yet, for the almost 2 billion women living under regimes with limited political rights and civil liberties, we know little about the processes that facilitate their entry into politics. One broad mechanism that may impact women under both democratic and closed systems is elite turnover. In this paper, I compare two routes to elite turnover, elections and legislative interruptions, and assess their impact on women's parliamentary representation. On one hand, legislative interruptions—when parliaments are dissolved for any reason for a period of one or more years—may cause the composition of entire assemblies to overturn, creating political opportunities for women. On the other hand, interruptions may signify military rule, which could create hostility towards female representation. Analyzing the likelihood that women will achieve 10 percent women in parliament for 153 countries from 1950 to 2000, I find that the effect of legislative interruptions is similar in magnitude to the effect of democratic elections. Although breaks lasting 3 to 10 years increase the likelihood that women will reach the 10 percent threshold, the effect of the longest legislative breaks is negative. Interruptions are also less effective vehicles for representation when considering more significant barriers—15% and 20% women in parliament. Across all outcomes, frequent interruptions hinder women's political progress. In sum, non-democratic routes to elite turnover can foster real gains in women's representation, but only when legislative breaks are rare, and this route is ultimately less effective than regular democratic elections at facilitating high levels of women in politics.