

# Women in Party Politics

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## *Introduction*

The Women's Reservation Bill – which proposes to reserve 33 per cent of seats in Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies for women – has been doing the rounds of the Indian Parliament in various forms since it was first introduced by the Deve Gowda government in 1996, failing each time, to pass. But during all these years that political parties have been passing the buck for their comprehensive failure to pass the bill, women's reservations in various forms have been introduced in a number of other countries. The experiences of these countries provide valuable lessons for India, regardless of the passage of the bill here.

Women constitute 10.6 percent of members of Parliament in India today, while globally this number is double, at 20.4 percent. Given the severe political underrepresentation of women, there has been a surge in the number of countries willing to experiment with various forms of women's reservations. Data from the International Institute for Democratic and Electoral Assistance, Stockholm (IDEA) shows that an increasing number of countries are currently introducing different types of gender quotas for public elections. Nearly half of the countries in the world today use some type of electoral quota for their parliaments. A distinction between two separate dimensions in the definition of women's reservations is clearly made by Dahlerup (2006). The first dimension covers the mandating authority, that is *who* has mandated the quota system, while the second dimension explores the selection and nomination process that the reservation targets.

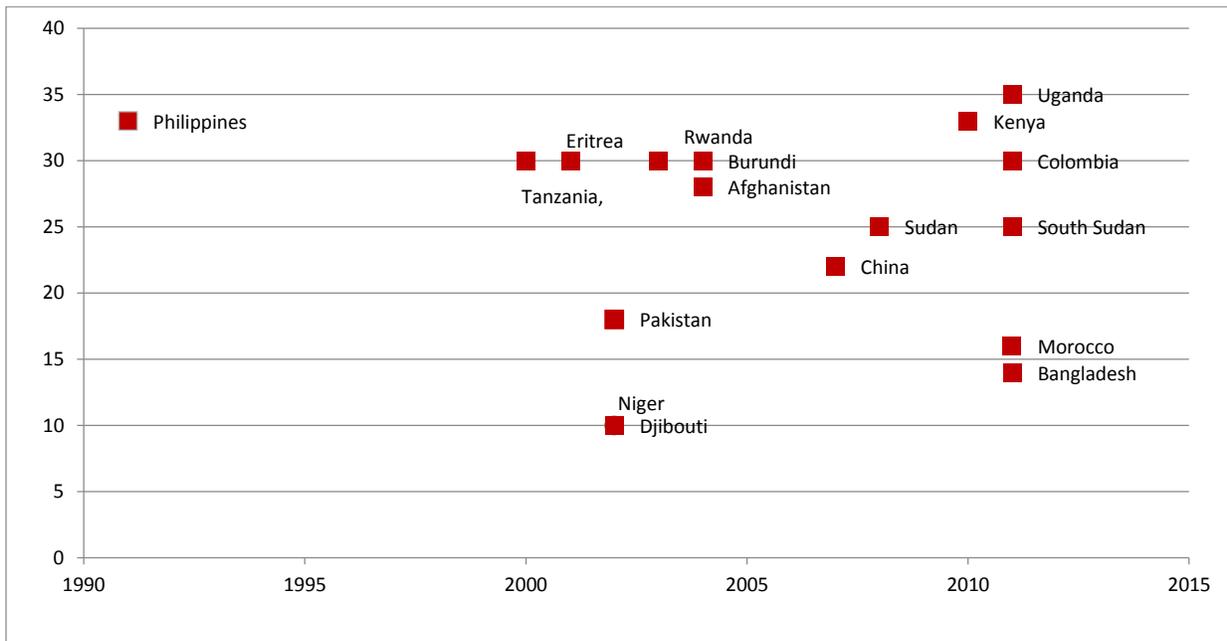
## *Global Experience*

The most common forms of reservation are quotas, either in the number of *seats* reserved for women or the setting of a minimum share for women on the *candidate lists* for elections. While setting a quota

in seats regulates the number of women getting elected to the parliament, establishing a minimum share in the candidates list can either be a legal requirement or be written into the statutes of individual political parties.

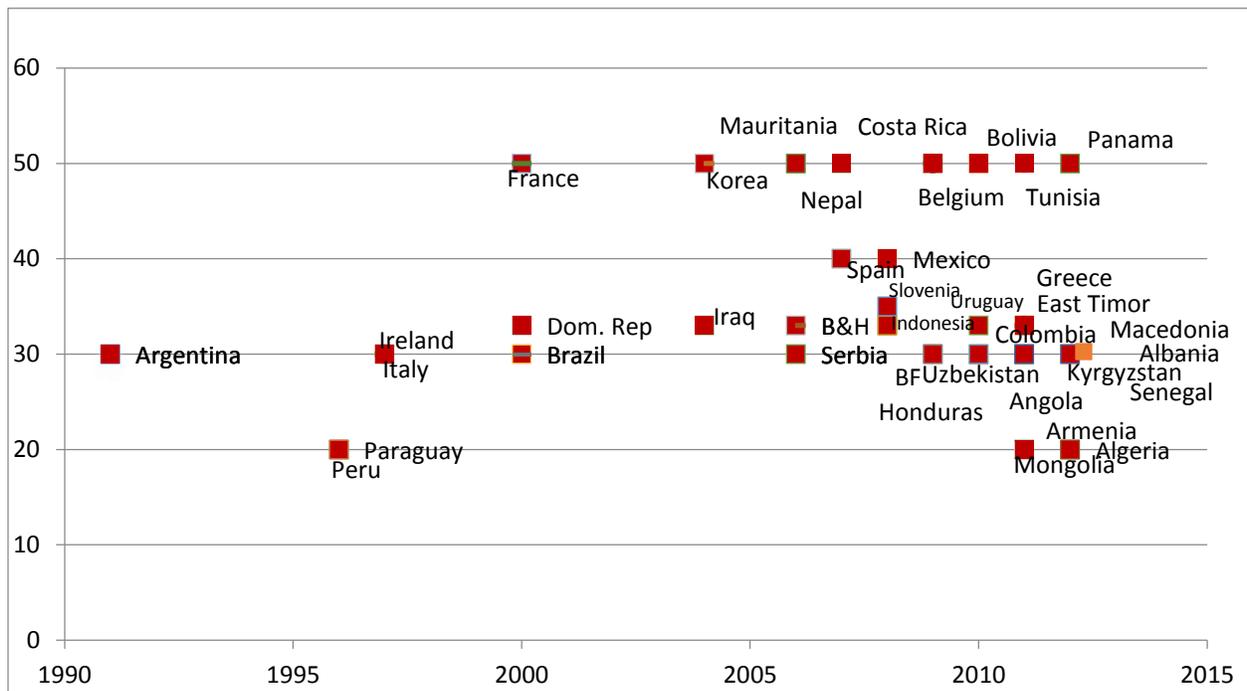
Figure 1 shows the introduction of women’s reservation and the percentage of seats reserved within the Parliaments of different countries. Starting with the Philippines in the early 1990s, several countries including India’s neighbours Pakistan and Bangladesh have legislated quotas for female representatives, ranging from 10 to 35 percent of seats. Another common form of reservation for female political representation is at the political party level, where legislation requires quotas for women candidates contesting elections within each political party. Figure 2 shows the data for this form of reservation, which started in Argentina in early 1990s, but has rapidly been adopted by other countries. The share of women in the list of candidates from each party has been legislated to be as high as 50 percent in countries such as France, Korea and Nepal among others.

**Figure 1. Percentage of seats reserved for women candidates in Parliament, by year**



Note: data source is the Quota Project, [International IDEA](#), [Stockholm University](#) and [Inter-Parliamentary Union](#)

Figure 2. Legislated quotas (percentage) for women candidates in political parties, by year



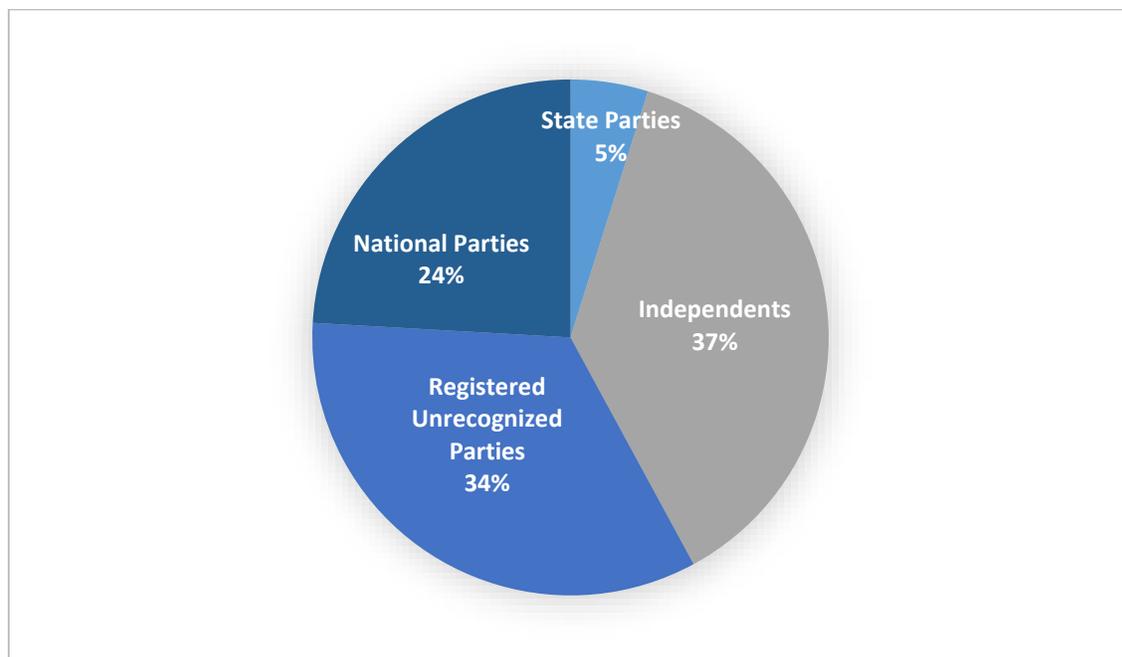
Note: data source is the Quota Project, [International IDEA](#), [Stockholm University](#) and [Inter-Parliamentary Union](#)

Global experimentation with different forms of women’s reservation is both inspirational and an early warning for India. There are strong lessons, which can help improve the design and implementation of quotas for women, and therefore, result in better female representation in Indian politics. Perhaps the most significant lesson from the global experience with quotas was summarized by the IDEA, which concluded that, “in almost all political systems, no matter what electoral regime, it is the political parties, not the voters that constitute the real gatekeepers to elected offices.”<sup>1</sup> Using this lens, we analyse the extent of the “gatekeeper” role that Indian political parties have played – both in terms of the number of women that are offered tickets for contesting elections, and the significance of women leaders within the internal party apparatuses. The data suggest that the claimed support for the Women’s Reservation Bill by political parties might be little more than lip service, revealing their woeful unpreparedness if the Bill were enacted into law.

## *Women in Indian Political Parties*

An analysis of Election Commission of India (ECI) data highlights that in the outgoing 15<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha, only 59 of the 543 seats were occupied by women. This is half the international average of 21 percent female representatives in Parliaments across the world. Even in terms of the number of candidates who contested elections, the scales were tilted vastly against women. Of the 8070, only 556 or 6.9 percent were women. Poignantly, as figure 3 shows, only 29 percent of these women candidates were ticket-holders of national or state political parties. While 34 percent of the female candidates belonged to Registered Unrecognized parties, 37 percent ran as independents.

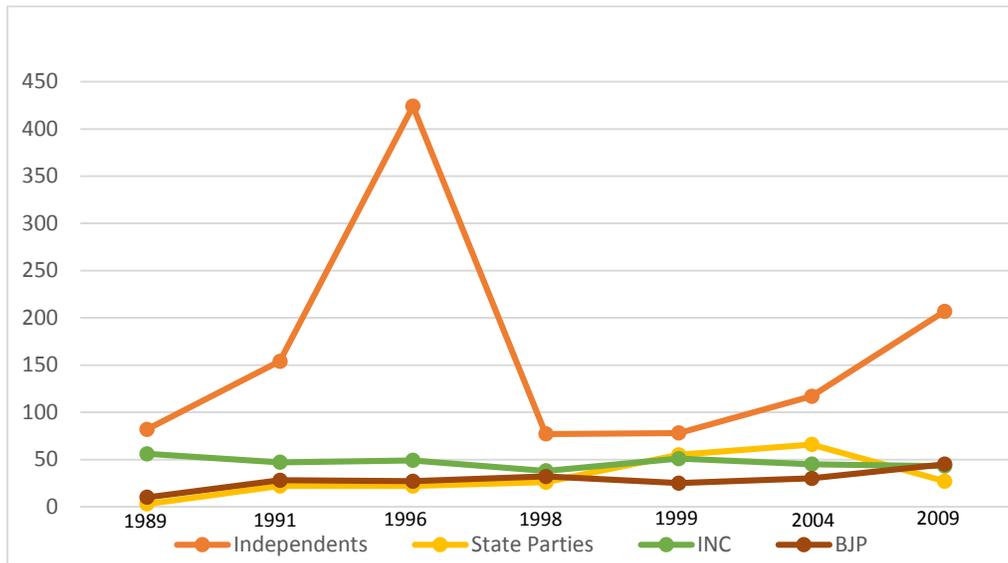
**Figure 3: Female Candidates by Party in 2009 elections**



*Note: Data source is the Election Commission of India*

This has been the trend for women candidates since 1989. As figure 4 below shows, there have traditionally been more women who run as independents than those who run as a part of a political party.

Figure 4: Women Candidates by Political Party, 1989-2009



*Note: Data source is the Election Commission of India*

The data on independent candidates point to another trend –women independents have increased at a greater rate than independents in general. Between 1991 and 1996 for instance, there was a spike in the participation of both total independents and women independents, but while the total increased by 93 percent, women independents increased by 175 percent. Similarly, between every subsequent election, the growth in women independents has been larger than independents in general.

The 1998 elections saw a sharp decline in the number of independent candidates. A possible explanation for this might be the ECI's decision to increase the security deposit for candidates from Rs.500, to Rs.10,000.

Next, we study the role of political parties in fielding women candidates. The number of women ticketholders from state parties fell sharply from 66 in 2004, to 27 in 2009. For national parties, the number of women candidates actually increased from 110 to 134, but nearly 60 percent of this increase is attributed to the BJP alone. While the Congress' number of women candidates reduced marginally,

the BJP fielded 50 percent more women than it did in 2004. This rapid increase by the BJP within two election cycles, helped it to catch up and overtake the Congress in the 15<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha election.

Unfortunately, neither the BJP, Congress or any other political party is fielding enough women candidates. Studying the disaggregated data by political parties, for the 2009 elections, we note in Table 1 that there are critical variations, but all parties are fielding significantly less than the benchmark of 33 per cent.

**Table 1. Women candidates by political parties, 2009 Lok Sabha elections**

Party	Number of total candidates	Number of women candidates	Number of women winners	Women as a percent of total candidates	Percentage of Women Candidates that won
AITC	27	5	4	18.52	80.00
NCP	68	7	2	10.29	28.57
BJP	433	44	13	10.16	29.55
INC	440	43	23	9.77	53.49
DMK	22	2	1	9.09	50.00
AIADMK	23	2	0	8.70	0.00
JDU	27	2	2	7.41	100.00
CPI (M)	82	6	1	7.32	16.67
CPI	56	4	0	7.14	0.00
TDP	31	2	0	6.45	0.00
SP	95	6	4	6.32	66.67
BSP	500	28	4	5.60	14.29
RJD	44	2	0	4.55	-
Shiv Sena	22	1	1	4.55	100.00
BJD	18	0	-	0.00	-
JDS	21	0	-	0.00	-
INDEPENDENTS	3831	207	0	5.40	0.00

**Note: Data source is the Election Commission of India**

The party with the highest representation of women was the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC), with 18.5 percent women candidates. The AITC, however is a clear outlier, and the Nationalist

Congress Party (NCP) is a distant second, with only 10.3 percent female ticket holders. The BJP and the Congress ranked third and fourth respectively, with only 10.16 percent and 9.77 percent of their 425-plus candidates being women.

This collective failure of political parties to field a critical mass of female candidates is worrisome because it highlights the absence of a pipeline of women leaders. Our political apparatus has collectively failed to nurture women leaders, leaving it unprepared should quotas in Parliament be legislated. In such a context, even if the Bill were to pass, its impact would be dubious.

### *Pakistan experience: some early warning signals*

Given the absence of a pool of potential women candidates, a reservation policy would accomplish little more than tokenism. Additionally, it is likely that political parties will field women only from seats that are reserved for them, making the general seats – male only.

This trend has been observed in Pakistan, where 17 percent of the seats in the National Assembly were reserved for women in 2002. In a critique, Huma Yusuf claims that it perpetuates tokenism, writing that “most women nominated to the seats hail from politically well-established and influential families.”<sup>ii</sup> She analyses the number of women who contested the unreserved seats in 2013 elections and finds that while the total number of women candidates for general seats increased from 76 (2008) to 108 (2013), only 36 of them contested through a political party. The increase in the number of women candidates was therefore driven largely by independent women contestants. Both the Pakistan People’s Party and the Pakistan Muslim League (Q) gave fewer tickets to women contestants for the general seats in 2013 compared to 2008.

Pakistan's example demonstrates how quotas can often perpetuate the perception that women should only contest from seats earmarked for them, creating therefore a glass ceiling preventing women from contesting general seats. An IDEA report on reservations across Asia finds this to be a larger concern when there is little pressure exerted on political parties to change or respond to the concerns of women. Quotas then become the only avenue for women's entry into Parliaments and legislatures. India, unfortunately, appears to be headed in the same direction as Pakistan. The goal of Reservation Bill must not merely be to *increase* the number of women representatives, but *improve* women's representation overall. While a policy of reserving seats in Parliament will certainly increase the number of women candidates, the absence of a pipeline of women leaders makes it likely that a majority of these candidates will be unprepared or from dynasties, as daughters and wives.

### ***South African experience: strong positive externalities***

Unlike Pakistan's experience, several other countries have experimented with increasing women's representation at the party or candidate level. This is either through legislated quotas, or through voluntary affirmative action undertaken by political parties. Countries such as Argentina, Mexico, and Costa Rica have legislated party quotas, and have over 36 percent female representation in their national legislatures. Other countries such as South Africa, Germany, and Sweden have successfully achieved similar levels of female representation through *voluntary* quotas by political parties. With women comprising 44.8 percent of its current National Assembly, South Africa serves as an excellent example of a successful experiment with voluntary party quotas.<sup>iii</sup>

The African National Congress started discussions on quotas for women since 1991 and by 1994 35.7 percent of representatives elected by ANC were women which resulted in 25 percent of the National

Assembly being women. Since then, a powerful women's movement within the party has emerged which has continued to strengthen this quota. In 2009 election manifesto, the ANC committed to increasing women representation to 50 percent by 2009. This was substantially achieved as 49.2 percent of ANC members in the National Assembly were women. Overall, the current National Assembly of South Africa has 43.5 percent women.

The ANC's voluntary quota for women also had significant positive externalities on the opposition parties. While the opposition parties did not *commit* themselves to quotas, the ANC's quotas had a spillover effect, leading to an increase in the proportion of women in opposition parties from 14.2 percent in 1994, to an impressive 31 percent in 2009. The second largest party (Democratic Alliance) more than doubled its women representatives and the third largest party (Congress of the People) had 50 per cent women among its representatives in the National Assembly in 2009.<sup>iv</sup>

Voluntary introduction of quotas for women candidates in the list of ticket holders is like a classic coordination problem in the game theoretic parlance. No single political party is willing to be the first mover. But, as the South African experience demonstrates, even a single party setting voluntary quotas can have widespread positive effects on a country's political environment as whole. It also underscores the importance of women's movements within parties. The voluntary quotas for women in South Africa emerged largely from the women's organization within the ANC itself. The Women's League of the ANC, first brought together a large number of women's organizations to create a charter addressing important issues of women. Thereafter since 1994, the Women's League has played an increasingly important role within the party. Explaining the internal party evolution, an ANC Member of Parliament, Mavivi Myakayaka-Manzini, writes, "To consolidate the role of women in decision-making, we had to make sure that the outcome went beyond numbers."<sup>v</sup>

## *Unpreparedness of Indian political parties*

Interestingly, several Indian political parties reveal an inclination to increase women participation among their rank and file. According to the Constitution of the INC, 33 percent of the seats in different Committees, 33 percent of members of the Executive Committees, and 33 percent of the seats for the All India Congress Committee (AICC) are to be reserved for women.<sup>vi</sup> Similarly, Rule 9 of the Trinamool Congress's constitution reserves 33 percent of seats in different committees for women.<sup>vii</sup> Even the Aam Aadmi Party has a ruling that 7 of the 30 members in its highest executive body, be women.<sup>viii</sup>

However, the challenge among Indian political parties is that these impressive constitutional rules are seldom followed. In the case of the INC, only 5 of the 42 members of the party's executive body, the CWC, are women. Similarly, 6 of the 57 AICC members are women and only 4 of the 14 members of their Election Committee are women. Moreover, 30 (of 35) state screening committees for elections don't have a single woman.<sup>ix</sup>

Statistics for Trinamool Congress and AAP are just as discouraging. Within the Trinamool, none of the 30 Vice Presidents are women; and only 2 out of the 8 General Secretaries, and 1 out of 14 Secretaries, are women. The party has 10 frontal organizations in West Bengal, of which only one – the Trinamool Mahila Congress – is led by a woman.<sup>x</sup> The AAP has 24-member National Executive, of which only two are women. This is significantly less than the 25 percent benchmark stated in their constitution.

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) has strongly censured both the BJP and the Congress for their failure to pass the Women's Reservation Bill in Parliament, stating that “denying women their place in elected policy making institutions, is a subversion of democracy.”<sup>xi</sup> Ironically, the CPI (M)

itself has failed to adequately represent women in the party's top leadership positions. There is only one woman in the 12-member polit bureau and only 11 out of the 74 Central Committee members are women.<sup>xii</sup>

The BJP's experiment with internal party quotas has been more successful. In 2007, the party amended its constitution to provide 33 percent reservation for women, following the recommendations of a Committee led by Sushma Swaraj. This was followed with another amendment in 2010 that increased the number of women in cadre posts. The powers of the BJP Mahila Morcha are clearly defined. At the national level, the National President of the Mahila Morcha serves as an ex-officio member of the Central Election Committee, which is responsible for making the final selection of candidates for the State Legislatures and Parliament, as well as administering election campaigns. Similarly, at the state-level, the President of the State Mahila Morcha serves on the State Election Committees.

As a consequence of these amendments within the BJP, 26 of the 77 members – or 33.7 percent – of the BJP's National Executive are women leaders. Women comprise 26 percent of BJP national office bearers, which is higher than all other political parties in India. Some statistics within the BJP, however still raise concern. For instance, only 2 of the 19 members of the Central Election Committee are women (one of who is the President of the Mahila Morcha). Out of the 12-member Parliamentary Board, there is only one woman representative. Similarly, in the party's various working groups, women are largely relegated to the Mahila Morcha, with no female representation on the Economic, Agriculture, Security, and Legal groups, and only marginal representation in others areas.<sup>xiii</sup>

In general then, most political parties in India flout the rules of their own constitutions. The absence of women in party leadership positions is indicative of an internal party infrastructure that is unsupportive of women's political participation.

It is apparent that women are confronting both explicit and implicit barriers when trying to reach higher positions within parties. Political parties, blame each other for the fate of the Women's Reservation Bill in India, but they abdicate their own responsibilities in ensuring a critical mass of women party workers and leaders within their party machinery. In a 2007 interview to *The Hindu*, BJP leader Sushma Swaraj recommended that "Parties should give 33 per cent of all tickets to women, as the system of rotation of reserved women's seats will not work."<sup>xiv</sup> But as the data for the 15<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha show, most parties, including the BJP, gave less than 11 per cent of their tickets to women.

Indian political parties, therefore, must realize their critical role as gatekeepers in women's political participation. Whether national parties like the BJP and Congress, or new parties such as the APP, each has to evolve internally to facilitate a greater culture of inclusiveness and operational democracy. The Election Commission of India too can play a pivotal role by holding parties accountable for their stated rules and promises in their Constitutions and manifestos.

The Women's Reservation Bill may or may not pass in India. However, it shouldn't stop political parties from making their internal structures more conducive for women and introducing quotas in their own candidate lists. Such fundamental reforms at the party level will serve as necessary and strategic complements to the Women's Reservation Bill. These party measures will ensure that the enactment of such a Bill will not result in mere tokenism. But even in the event that the Bill continues to be derailed, internal reforms within political parties will have long run effects in improving the true political representation of a population of which women comprise a significant share.

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### Notes:

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