The Role of International Electoral Observation Missions in the Promotion of the Political Rights of Women: The Case of the OAS

Betilde Muñoz-Pogossian

ABSTRACT

Electoral equity is a fundamental component of a democratic election, and therefore a principal concern of international electoral observation. In order to institutionalize the focus on electoral equity, in 2010 the Organization of American States began to develop a rigorous methodology to incorporate a gender perspective into its electoral observation missions. The experience of observing elections with a gender lens has led to several conclusions, namely that low levels of female political representation are a consequence of political party structures, and that the representation of women increases with gender quotas and policies that increase the access of women to political financing. The gender-focus of OAS Missions has served to highlight the underrepresentation of women in public office through recommendations to strengthen female political participation. The impact of the methodology derives from the possibility that these recommendations will serve as springboards for change in the countries of the Americas.

The 2005 Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation, developed and signed by the community of practice, defines international election observation as a process to assess the compliance of an electoral process with national legislation in the observed country and international standards for democratic elections. Electoral observation missions provide impartial evaluations that focus on whether the conditions of an electoral process are conducive to the full exercise of political rights, a situation which is contingent, among various things, on the assurance of electoral equity. In the context of an election, equity refers to a guarantee, in each of the three phases of the process, that all voters are able to...
exercise their franchise and that all candidates are able to participate on a level playing field in the competition for public office. Equity is a necessary condition for a democratic election. Paying attention to conditions of equity is thus a fundamental duty of international electoral observation.

From the perspective of gender equality, electoral equity can be defined as the condition in which women and men are able to exercise their political rights as citizens in an equal manner. Political citizenship is manifested in three substantive rights: the right to choose one’s representatives and to be elected; the right to participate in the management of public affairs and the formulation of public policy; and lastly access to public service, namely the right to hold political office. Equality of opportunity for both men and women and electoral equity are thus inseparable concepts.

Nonetheless, very few of the signatory institutions to the Declaration of Principles have incorporated a systematic gender focus into their electoral observation missions. This deficiency was raised in the Third International Meeting on the Implementation of the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation, held in 2008 in Maputo, Mozambique, by a number of organizations that monitor elections in the Western Hemisphere, namely the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the European Union, the Carter Center, and the Organization of American States (OAS). Despite the mandates and institutional commitments to address gender equality expressed at the higher institutional levels of international organizations, these institutions agreed that there tends to be a palpable reluctance to spare time and resources on the issue as well as a general lack of political will to implement such commitments. This disjunction between rhetoric and practice requires attention.

For international organizations, electoral observation missions are initiatives that are fundamentally aimed at the promotion and defense of democracy. The final product of such missions is the presentation to the host country of recommendations that identify the areas in which political and electoral reforms are necessary. Electoral observation reports constitute an ideal mechanism for international organizations to highlight shortcomings for the equal participation of men and women in the electoral process. The failure to address such a basic and underlying aspect of democracy is a cause for concern. The result is that inequities are perpetuated and elections are continually ratified as “democratic.” Meanwhile, the persistent under-representation of women in democratic institutions goes unnoticed. In this light, electoral observation missions that overlook the issue of gender equity are not complying with their mandate to comprehensively evaluate a political process.

The role that electoral observation missions (EOMs) could play in signaling the importance of women’s political rights was raised in the remarks given by Barbadian Senator Irene Sandiford-Garner in a forum organized at the OAS. Senator Sandiford-Garner challenged OAS/EOMs—as one of the most recognized and visible initiatives of the Organization—to do more to highlight the underrepresentation of women in public office. Her remarks and the discussion that followed started to consolidate the view that gender needed to be looked at seriously in the context of OAS electoral missions. Additionally, since 2000, the General Secretariat of the OAS had operated with a policy to promote gender equity within the secretariat and in all projects and activities carried out by the institution. Following the implementation of that policy, various workshops were conducted on the subject matter, one of which addressed the mainstreaming of gender in electoral projects and electoral observation missions. While the development of the methodology did not begin immediately thereafter, OAS Department of Electoral Cooperation and Observation (DECO) staff interested in gender issues started to “ask the right questions” regarding the need for observation with a gender lens. These efforts were supported by traditional OAS/EOM donors, namely Spain, Germany, and Canada, who saw an added value in missions that tackled the gender gap in political participation. In addition, it is important to emphasize that efforts to incorporate the gender perspective in electoral observation were consistent with a number of legal instruments that commit the Organization and its member states to the promotion of gender equality. Notably, Article 28 of the 2001 Inter-American Democratic Charter links the full and equal participation of women in political structures with the promotion of a democratic culture. This confluence of circumstances provoked the institutional decision

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in 2008–2009 to develop a methodology to incorporate a gender perspective into OAS electoral observation missions.

The question then was: how to expose? How could the OAS employ its mandate to observe electoral processes to contribute to the visibility of women in the political sphere? While the 2005 Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation affirms a general commitment to non-discrimination in various instances, only one of the principles explicitly addresses gender concerns:

The endorsing organizations also recognize the importance of balanced gender diversity in the composition of participants and leadership of international election observation missions, as well as diversity of citizenship in such missions.

This recognition of diversity in the composition of observation leadership and teams by the signatory institutions to the International Declaration of Principles constitutes a limited vision of incorporating gender perspective into electoral observation. It is not sufficient to ensure the equal representation of both sexes in the composition of missions, though this is a necessary step (see Figure 1). It is also the policy of OAS/DECO and the OAS as a whole. Mainstreaming the gender focus in electoral observation is a more comprehensive effort. Missions must assess the differentiated participation of men and women in each aspect of the electoral process and identify the causes of the inequalities that hamper the political rights of women in the context of an election.

As such, the OAS undertook an initiative to design a standardized methodology that incorporates the gender perspective into all aspects of its election observation efforts. The methodology would allow the OAS to assess, and contribute to, the equal participation of both women and men in all levels of the electoral process: as voters; as candidates in national and local elections; as leaders within state institutions; as elected officials; within electoral management bodies (EMBs); and within political party structures. The objective is to identify and expose barriers to the full political participation of men and women in the context of the electoral process and the country observed.

Focusing on the OAS definition of Democratic Elections, OAS/EOMs are designed to assess the conditions for the exercise of women’s political rights from four perspectives: two that address the participation of men and women as voters and two that focus on gender equity in terms of candidates and elected officials (see Figure 2). As a result, the gender perspective is mainstreamed into every substantive aspect of an OAS/EOM. The OAS assesses: 1) whether elections are inclusive, meaning that all citizens—both male and female—

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enjoy conditions that allow them to exercise their right to vote; 2) whether elections are clean, in which the electoral preferences of both male and female voters are respected and faithfully recorded; 3) whether elections are competitive, in that both male and female candidates participate in conditions of relative equality and that diverse options are offered to the electorate; and finally 4) whether the main public offices are filled through regular elections, and that those elected are not removed once in power.

Based on these attributes of democratic elections, the OAS developed quantitative and qualitative indicators in order to systematically assess gender equality in every aspect of the observed electoral process: from access to registration and polling stations to freedom of association and access to information, among others. A matrix of these indicators, which details calculating methods and sources of information, is contained within the forthcoming Manual to Incorporate a Gender Perspective into OAS Electoral Observation Missions.

In the context of the Americas, where OAS electoral observation is carried out, national legislation of many countries expresses a rhetorical commitment to gender equity. Many OAS member states are signatories to international instruments such as the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). All are bound by the Inter-American Democratic Charter. In most cases, legal structures commit states to the promotion of female participation and to gender equality in the public sphere. The indicators in the OAS/EOM gender methodology were designed to assess the gap between formal equality and actual equality. OAS/EOMs reveal the disparities between the rights enshrined in international treaties and a reality in which women confront barriers that impede their ability to vote and in which women do not enjoy the same opportunities to compete for elected office as men.

Subsequent to the design of the theoretical framework, to determine how the gender focus would be implemented in practice, the methodology was tested in various OAS electoral observation missions in 2010 and 2011. Pilots were carried out in the municipal elections in Paraguay (November 2010), presidential elections in Peru (April 2011), presidential elections in Guatemala (September 2011), municipal elections in Colombia (October 2011), and general elections in Guyana (November 2011) and Saint Lucia (November 2011). Each mission shed new light on the best ways to implement gender-focused observation methodology in the context of an OAS/EOM. In terms of the substantive aspects related to women’s participation, although the political contexts and types of elections observed were diverse, the same challenges recurred from one country to the next. Some conclusions emerged from the experience of observing electoral processes with a gender lens.

First, low levels of female political representation, particularly in high-level positions, are largely a consequence of political party structures. The ability of women to occupy leadership positions depends on the nature of recruitment processes within political parties. Considering the fact that parties are typically the organizations responsible for presenting candidates to the electorate, they effectively serve as gatekeepers of political office.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Poll Workers</th>
<th>Presidents of Polling Stations</th>
<th>Party Agents</th>
<th>Domestic Observers</th>
<th>Legislative Candidates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PARAGUAY</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>54.2%</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
<td>54.6%</td>
<td>72.2%</td>
<td>9.6%*</td>
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<tr>
<td>PERU</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>39.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>GUATEMALA</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GUYANA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAINT LUCIA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
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*In the case of Paraguay, the elections were municipal, thus the percentage of candidates in this case applies to positions in town councils.
It is therefore fundamental to observe how women are represented in leadership positions within parties. Through the implementation of the gender methodology, the OAS has been able to verify that women actively participate at the grassroots level as party members and activists; in the countries observed women have made up a majority of the agents or poll-watchers employed by political organizations during elections. Women are also highly active as poll workers and domestic electoral observers.

However, significant female involvement in the administrative aspects of the electoral process is not reflected in terms of candidates (see Table 1). In the elections in which the OAS conducted pilots, the percentage of women included in legislative electoral lists averaged 26%. In many cases the number was far lower. Even fewer were placed in winnable positions within party lists. Such low levels of female candidacies reflect a lack of political will on the part of political parties in the region to field female candidates or allow women to hold leadership positions. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that there is an ambiguous relationship between internal democracy within political parties and opportunities for women to participate meaningfully in politics. Parties that hold primary elections are not necessarily more likely to nominate female candidates.

Second, female representation in key decision-making positions tends to increase when governments implement gender quotas. Within the Hemisphere, fourteen countries (13 in Latin America and one in the Caribbean)\(^7\) have incorporated policies on quotas or parity for elections in the Lower Legislative Chamber. Five countries in the region have incorporated such policies for the Upper Legislative Chamber.\(^8\) These efforts are in many ways the byproduct of the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, which established the objective that 30% of positions at decision-making levels should be occupied by women. While the negative and positive implications of gender quotas, particularly their relationship with internal democracy, are much debated, their effect is undeniable. Those countries that have implemented some kind of quota have presided over clear advances towards greater representation of women in the political sphere, which in some cases have been significant. As a result, current debate in the region has shifted beyond quotas towards discussion of gender parity, mechanisms to ensure that men and women assume equal representation in the different spheres of state administration. Ecuador, Bolivia, and Costa Rica have moved in this direction through a series of legislative reforms.

Finally, affirmative action policies that focus on increasing the access of women to political financing, when combined with the implementation of gender quotas, have demonstrable effects on female political participation. Mexico, for example, mandates that two percent of ordinary public financing provided to political parties be dedicated to the training of women; Costa Rica obligates gender parity in the resources distributed to political parties. When designed effectively, such policies ensure that women are placed in winnable positions within candidates’ lists and thus have a more realistic chance of being elected. Indeed, the opportunity to participate effectively in politics depends highly on the capacity of candidates to obtain funds. Given that resources are a necessary condition for being competitive in an electoral race, difficulties in access to finances constitute a barrier to entry. By impeding the access of women to power, such resource disparity ends up altering the balance in political representation, with negative effects on gender equality. The issue of political financing is fundamental to equity in the electoral system and the democratic process.

Though the gender-focused methodology is still in its early stages of implementation, the improved analytical capacity that it has provided has already contributed substantive benefits to the democracy strengthening efforts of the OAS. First of all, incorporating a gender perspective has allowed OAS missions to bring the issue of women’s political rights to light. Media interest in the subject has been evident since the first pilot implementation in Paraguay 2009. Local coverage of the OAS methodology and gender issues in general has helped place gender equality into the national political conversation, raising the visibility of the issue in the context of an election.

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\(^7\)In Latin America, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Colombia, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Dominican Republic, and Uruguay operate with quotas. Guyana is the only Caribbean country that has adopted a quota.

\(^8\)In many cases, these quota laws establish a minimum percentage applicable to women or minimums/maximums that are applicable to both sexes. The legislation in Peru, for example, stipulates that the men or women must make up at least 30% of candidates.
Making gender equity a focus of OAS/EOMs has stimulated dialogue, helping identify new initiatives to strengthen the participation of women in political life. In that sense, the recommendations formulated by OAS observation missions and presented to the governments and electoral authorities of the host country are fundamental. These recommendations, aimed at strengthening the inclusiveness of electoral processes, are perhaps the instrument of OAS/EOMs that exerts the most direct influence in the observed country. The impact of the gender-focused methodology derives from the possibility that these recommendations will serve as springboards for change. After all, the underlying goal of incorporating the gender focus into electoral observation is to find solutions to one of the biggest problems confronting democracy in the Americas: gender inequality. Failure to incorporate a gender focus would simply reinforce existing conditions of inequality. Overcoming such inequitable conditions is a necessary step on the path towards genuine representative democracies in which rights and freedoms are exercised fully by all citizens. The same holds true for other organizations engaged in international electoral observation, in order to fulfill their commitment to promote and defend democracy through electoral cooperation and observation.

Address correspondence to:
Betilde Muñoz-Pogossian
Department of Electoral Cooperation and Observation
Secretariat for Political Affairs
Organization of American States
1889 F Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20006

E-mail: bmunoz@oas.org