

## Research Article

# Two Decades of Women's Affirmative Action in Indonesia: Some Reflections and Recommendations

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**Abstract.**

Democracy essentially requires equal rights between men and women. Both men and women should have equal opportunity to participate in public affairs such as politics. However, women's political participation remains low compared to men. Women face many obstacles in expressing their political views, particularly in electoral politics. To address the issue, the government has adopted affirmative action by setting a gender quota to enhance women's political representation. However, the quota does not automatically increase women's electability parliament. Indonesia is an example of this case. Women's political representation has never exceeded 30% since the introduction of direct elections. We used a qualitative method for this study. We found that four reasons cause the issue – women's socio-political capital, the weakness of party institutionalization, the strict political competition among candidates, and voters' pragmatic behavior during elections. We concluded that there should be severe attempts from various parties – government, political party, and civil society – to increase women's political representation. Our study matters for mainstreaming gender equality and pushing democracy more substantively.

**Keywords:** affirmative policy, Indonesia, women's political representation.

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## 1. Introduction

Women's political participation is essential for democracy. The availability of space for women to be involved in political affairs means there is a guarantee for all citizens to express their rights. Since one of the basic principles of democracy is equality, the state must provide equal space for males and females in politics. However, females often face barriers to entering politics. In this case, the state takes affirmative action to promote women's political participation. In Indonesia, there is a gender quota of around 30% that is allocated to women in political affairs. Although women's political participation has increased since this policy was introduced, it never reaches and exceeds 30% for female legislators. Therefore, our purpose in this article is to address two critical

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questions: what makes women's political representation in Indonesia remain low? How can we tackle this issue to make democracy more substantive?

The literature on women's political participation has intensively increased since democratization in 1998. Many scholars have various views on women's political participation. Even though gender quotas have been introduced formally, women face severe challenges and obstacles to engaging actively in the country's political affairs (1). The gap between male and female political representation remains high (Prihatini, 2018). Women's involvement in politics has not yet penetrated the mainstream of Indonesian politics, which is still dominated by the assumption of masculinity based on power politics (3). In this sense, patriarchal culture remains a high barrier for women to be actively involved in political affairs (4). Women have often been stigmatized and positioned in the domestic sphere, which has limited their representation in public spaces (5). Hillman (2018) sees institutional factors, such as changes to the voting system and campaign funding, present a significant challenge to women's advancement in Indonesian politics. Political parties only see a gender quota as an administrative requirement to participate in electoral competition (7). Furthermore, parties care about women's candidates with high electability to be MPs (8).

Although most Indonesians are Muslim, Dewi (2017) has found that Islam does not limit women's political participation. Administratively, Islamic parties can fill a 30% requirement in nominating women as MP's candidates (10). Furthermore, the degree of voters' education also plays a critical factor in influencing voters' behavior toward women candidates (11). However, to some extent, cultural, political, and historical factors have contributed to the ineffectiveness of the gender quota, and discrimination toward women in politics remains high (12). In the same vein, another author views cultural and religious factors that create barriers for Indonesian Muslim women to participate freely in public and political life (13). Therefore, it is not surprising if there are voices demanding improvements of the current regulations on affirmative policy for women's political rights to a system of reserved seats to create equal representation (14).

Overall, the papers above suggest that while there have been efforts to increase women's representation in Indonesian politics, the progress has been slow and has faced challenges. On the one hand, gender quotas may have contributed to some increase in women's representation in parliament. However, that is not sufficient to address the underlying issues that limit women's political participation in Indonesia. There are still significant challenges and obstacles that need to be addressed by political institutions such as political parties or political regulations.

## 2. Method

This article applied a qualitative method. The main source is relevant literature on women's political participation in Indonesia, be it articles in academic journals, news in mass media, government websites, and books. We also hold intensive discussions with the research team members regarding what points we should emphasize in our study.

## 3. Result and Discussion

General elections are the hope for women's political representation in Indonesia. Through elections, the opportunity for women to hold political office is wide open. Theoretically, there is equal opportunity for women and men to be elected as people's representatives. Unfortunately, political reality is not as desired by those who encourage women's active participation. Since the 1999-2014 elections, the number of women represented in parliament has never reached 30%. In the 2019 election, women's political representation increased. There are 120 women or 20.9% of the total seats of 575 in the DPR. This figure is certainly a growth from the 2014 election, where in the DPR there was only 17.32% female representation. However, this is still far from the expected reality regarding women's representation in Indonesia.

Based on our observations, there are several reasons for the low representation of women. First, women's political capital. In the 2019 election, it was found that 44% (fifty-three women elected as members of the DPR) were part of dynastic politics (15). They are mainly wives, daughters, or sisters of party leaders or political office holders such as governors, legislative members, etc. Folke et al. (2021) state that a candidate can be categorized as part of dynastic politics if they are related by marriage or blood relationship. In this sense, favoritism based on family ties has made equal opportunity to enter politics become unequal.

The inequality and disparity in women's political capital cause many women to think twice about entering the world of practical politics. This can be clearly seen from family relations as a supporting factor for women's success in occupying parliamentary seats. This also cannot be separated from the expensive election costs for legislative candidates to win parliamentary seats. For example, a legislative candidate must spend around Rp. 1.15-Rp 4.6 billion to win a seat in the legislative (DPR) (Hayat, 2023).

Second, there is a weakness in party identification (Party ID) among Indonesian voters. Basically, a Party ID is an individual attachment toward a particular party (18). This ideological affiliation creates voter loyalty to a party. The low emotional connection

between parties and voters results in the weak institutionalization of political parties in Indonesia without having a solid mass base. This can be seen from the results of a survey by the Indonesian Survey Institute (LSI), which shows that more than 83 percent of voters in Indonesia do not have a sense of closeness to the party (19). Since the 1999-2019 elections, the trend shows that non-ideological factors influence voter behavior, so the winning party in the election is always changing (20).

Weak Party ID can be seen in the presidential and regional elections, where candidates proposed by certain parties are not always supported by voters. The lack of empathy of political parties towards issues that exist in society results in swing voters (voters who change their choice of political party from one election to another), which also has the potential to shift the mass base to other parties. Naturally, in the end, most voters decided on the day the election was held (undecided voters). In essence, apart from the decline in public participation in elections, which is still happening today, many voters are not sure about their choice. This, of course, has an indirect impact on women as minority participants in elections (Efriza, 2019).

Third, the political competition centered on the candidate has put extra challenge to female candidates. The introduction of an open proportional system in 2009 has caused competition in elections to become increasingly intense. Competition does not only occur among parties but also among candidates from the same party. Personality and network factors greatly determine the candidate's victory rate in the open proportional format. In fact, it is not uncommon for candidates to use money politics to widen the odds of winning. In this context, female candidates, of course, have to fight extra hard to be elected to parliament. Apart from that, in order to gain votes, political parties also give more priority to candidates with a high level of personality, strong networks, and significant political capital. Thus, it is understandable why the party only made the 30% quota a mere administrative requirement. Political parties prioritize their long-term existence amidst competitive elections and pragmatic voter behavior. However, this trend is not good enough for democratic deepening. Democracy essentially requires a proper system over personality. The significance of personality will not only limit women's opportunity to enter politics but also hinder Indonesia's democratic consolidation.

Fourth, looking from a voter behavior perspective shows that female voters do not necessarily choose female candidates. Voter behavior in Indonesia is generally still influenced by sociological factors rather than rational choices. In a society that is very steeped in masculinity, this condition is undoubtedly a big challenge for female candidates to enter politics.

Based on the explanation above, we can see that the affirmative policy in the form of a gender quota of 30% is still only a complement to political party administration. We need to encourage it so that it is not only a symbolic rule but can also substantively increase women's political participation within the framework of democratic consolidation. There are several suggestions that we can convey. First, political parties are not only required to fulfill the requirement of 30% female representation. Parties must also be encouraged to empower the women who are their members. The party must provide competency strengthening and assistance for female candidates. So, parties do not simply abandon their female candidates in the competition to seek voter support.

Second, parties can ask for recommendations from civil society organizations regarding qualified female candidates. Civil society organizations, particularly those focused on women's empowerment, have a pool of qualified activists who can potentially become legislative candidates. Additionally, female activists possess social capital that can bolster their presence in politics due to their extensive advocacy efforts aimed at representing women's interests and safeguarding their political rights.

Third, the government needs to make regulations regarding thresholds for campaign funding for legislative candidates as a first step in preventing the practice of money politics during elections. Without a threshold, of course, there will be disparities in the financial abilities of legislative candidates in funding their campaigns. The campaign will be filled with program offers rather than material rewards. The existence of campaign funding thresholds can help qualified female candidates.

## 4. Conclusion

The presence of gender quotas is a positive step in opening up space for women's political participation. There are still many things that need to be improved by all parties so that women's political representation can be achieved according to what has been envisioned by the proponents of this issue. Women's political representation is also a component that can encourage the strengthening of democracy in Indonesia.

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## Declaration of Conflict Interest

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

## Biography

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