

Focus on: Africa

REFLECTIONS ON THE ELECTION SUPER CYCLE FROM A GENDER LENS

A series of write up from experts in the field reflecting on the role of women in last elections.

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About the Author

REFLECTIONS ON THE ELECTION SUPER CYCLE GRETCHEN BAUER

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Reflections on the Election Super Cycle from a Gender Lens (Africa)

Across the world in 2024, [more than 70 national elections](#) were held, affecting more than half the world's population. Some trends emerged from these elections including the ousting from office of incumbents and voting into office of more rightwing populists. This brief essay explores these trends in Africa's 2024 elections, as well as the implications of the 2024 elections for women's representation in legislatures and executives across the continent.

[Elections in Africa](#) in 2024 were located mostly in southern and northwest Africa – and largely conformed with global trends. So, for example, in South Africa and Botswana, incumbent political parties that had been in power for 30 and 60 years, respectively, were voted out of office. Incumbents were also voted out in Senegal, Mauritius and Ghana, among others. Also, sources such as Afrobarometer have reported that '[democracy is at risk](#)' in many African countries, with one recent intervention suggesting that a '[democratic counter-wave](#) has washed over the continent.'

Part of the democratic counter-wave in Africa has been [a wave of military coups since 2020](#), mostly in countries of the Sahel: Gabon, Niger, Burkina Faso, Sudan, Guinea, Chad, and Mali – leading also to the postponement of national elections slated for 2024 in some of those countries. Military rule has never been propitious for women's participation and representation in politics, as scholars have shown for Ghana and Nigeria, among others (Bauer 2017, Mama 1998). Rather, under military regimes, gender discourses may be co-opted by military leaders, associational life may be dominated by first ladies and their foundations, women traders may be demonized and scapegoated. Rwanda, which has led Africa – and the world – in [women's representation in a single or lower house of parliament](#) for more than two decades, with more women than men in its Chamber of Deputies, also held elections in 2024. To no one's surprise, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and its leader Paul Kagame were overwhelmingly returned to power. Rwanda's leader has long been accused of using his government's very impressive gender equality accomplishments to 'genderwash' an authoritarian polity and society. Under this 'autocratic genderwashing,' leaders may take credit for gender equality advances in order to divert attention from nondemocratic practices such as violating human rights or election integrity (Bjarnegard and Zetterberg 2022).

In electing more women to national legislatures, the choice of electoral system and the use of an electoral gender quota (or not) remain the most critical factors (Dahlerup and Friedenvall 2005). Proportional representation (PR) electoral systems, especially closed list ones, are considered more favorable for the emergence of women candidates and the adoption of gender quotas. South Africa, Namibia and Senegal have all used PR electoral systems - achieving high levels of women's representation through voluntary party quotas in South Africa and Namibia and a gender parity law in Senegal. In the 2024 elections in those countries – in which incumbents were ousted – women's representation remained steady, 44.7 percent in South Africa, 52.9 percent in Namibia, and 41.2 percent in Senegal. In [Namibia](#), notably, a first woman president was elected, joining the handful of women ever elected president in an African country.

Single member district (SMD) or first past the post electoral systems, which are candidate-centered, are far more challenging for selecting women candidates and adding electoral gender quotas. Some of the challenges to women candidates include the high financial cost of standing for office, and a ‘politics of insult’ that affects male and female candidates but women much more, among others (Bauer and Darkwah 2020). In Africa, those countries with SMD electoral systems and no gender quota for parliaments are ranked among the lowest, including Nigeria at 3.9 percent women since its 2023 elections. Interestingly, Sierra Leone changed its electoral system from SMD to PR in 2023 and added a 30 percent quota. Since Sierra Leone’s 2023 elections, there are 29.5 percent women in parliament. In elections in [Botswana](#) and [Ghana](#) in 2024, women’s representation remained at the very low levels they have been for many years: 8.7 percent in Botswana and 14.8 percent in Ghana. That said, Ghana’s election was historic in bringing into office the country’s [first woman vice-president](#).

In early 2024, Mozambique and South Africa had [gender parity cabinets](#), with Angola, Malawi, Ethiopia and Tunisia following close behind. Cabinet positions are appointed and well understood to be the ‘president’s prerogative.’ As such, bringing more women into cabinets should be relatively easily accomplished by presidential fiat (Bauer and Darkwah 2022). No clear links have been established between women’s representation in legislatures and cabinets, but across Africa both seem to be on an incremental upward trajectory – despite global electoral trends ousting incumbents and bringing in autocrats in 2024.

For the moment, then, the outcome of elections in 2024 across Africa (aside those that were postponed or cancelled) seem to suggest [challenges and opportunities](#) for women’s representation. Women continue to be elected to the highest executive offices in small numbers, consistent with global trends. In many cases though, newly elected executives are exercising their powers of appointment to bring more women into cabinets, where they are leading significant portfolios like finance, justice, and foreign affairs. In many African countries that have achieved near parity in parliaments, those accomplishments are holding steady. In other countries, meanwhile, women’s representation in parliaments remains shockingly low. Women’s organization mobilization and renewed attention to electoral institutions may help ameliorate those remaining challenges.

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