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What Role Do Women in Politics Play for Democratic Erosion?

Emelyn Rodriguez

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Submitted to the faculty of Ursinus College in fulfillment of the
requirements for Honors in Politics

This research project began as part of the Ursinus College Summer Fellows program during May-July 2021 and continued as an Honors project in Fall & Spring 2021-22.

Faculty mentor: Johannes Karreth

Abstract: Research has found that women in politics are important for representation and women's rights, but can women's increasing involvement in politics also stabilize fragile democracies? This research analyzes the relationship between women in politics and democratic consolidation, asking whether and how women help consolidate democracies and prevent the erosion of democratic institutions. I show initial quantitative evidence suggesting that under some conditions, women in politics reduce the probability of democratic erosion. In the main part of the project, using a case study of the Dominican Republic, I take a closer look at the work women have done for a newly established democracy. First, I will discuss the impact the Mirabal Sisters had at toppling the autocratic ruler Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. Secondly, I discuss the role of female activists in making democracy effective in the Dominican Republic. Lastly, I report results from three in-depth interviews with women with ties to the Dominican Republic and their perception of women's role in securing and maintaining democracy. The project lends additional relevance to the study of women in politics.

Author contributions: ER developed the initial idea. ER reviewed literature and developed theory. JK compiled and analyzed quantitative data. ER conducted qualitative case study work. ER wrote the paper.

IRB approval: This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Ursinus College under the Protocol File Number: JK-POL-Women-0122x.

Introduction

Democracy is under threat worldwide. Much recent research aims to explain why democracies weaken and slide back into autocratic structures. The conventional wisdom highlights internal and external sources of threats to democracy, from a rise of populism to changing news environments and the impact of unresolved political conflicts (Bermeo 2016). Other researchers have observed that autocratic tendencies and backsliding often target women in particular. Building on a wave of scholarly and practical attention to gender in politics and increasing female representation, this project examines the role of women during the process of democratic consolidation, erosion, and backsliding. I evaluate whether the well-established role of women in expanding suffrage and political rights also extends to democratic consolidation and during “hard times” for democracy. Because nominal representation of women has recently expanded around the globe (IPU 2020), I also address the question of whether efforts to increase female representation helps make the world “safe for democracy”.

Democracy prevents politicians from holding onto too much power and avoids politicians from adopting measures that would decrease individual freedom. Through participation in democratic processes, citizens can limit the power of politicians and ensure their voice is heard as described by Dahl - democracy is a system of equality that provides the people with participation, knowledge, and inclusion (Dahl 1998). Although the definition of democracy varies around the globe, the universal goal is to establish a system that prevents total control from government. The desire for power has driven many politicians to violate the idea established by democracy and, therefore, violate individual freedoms. With the challenging of these ideas surged democratic backsliding –Bermeo (2016) defined democratic backsliding as “the state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy”

(2015, 5). This democratic reversal raises two significant questions – why do democracies backslide, and what can prevent it?

Democratic backsliding has been taking place in many democracies around the world. While the reason behind backsliding varies depending on certain factors, a general reason “seems to be related to a wider discontent with liberal democracy, declining levels of political participation and trust, and an erosion of traditional party systems (Roggeband and Krizan, 2019). Citizens have begun to lose trust in the system and decline their right to participate in politics, creating an opportunity for the government to assume all the power and abuse their rights even more. During the process of democratic erosion, citizens suffer significantly as the governments violate their rights and expand their power. Primarily, citizens suffer during this process because their rights as citizens are suppressed, holding them back from opposing the abuse of power in the country. Many citizens and civil society groups might gather to defeat an abusive central government and preserve their rights as citizens under a peaceful democracy. During the process of backsliding, the government deprives these citizens of essentials to survive if they do not approve their regime.

In some cases, though, civil society groups prevent backsliding and help achieve democratic consolidation. As citizens begin to have a say in the political processes of a nation, democratic consolidation begins to take place. Democratic consolidation is the process by which democracies become more stable, run multiple competitive and fair elections, and allow for peaceful change of leadership. In many cases, democracies consolidate but still suppress the

voices of some. In many cases, women are deprived from enjoying certain political rights making the democratic backsliding process repeat itself.

Throughout his paper I aim to answer the following question: do women play a role in democratic backsliding? This paper will focus on the importance of women in politics, but specifically, why might women be important for democratic erosion and consolidation?

How women strengthen democracy through participation

This project asks what role women leaders and activists play in democratic consolidation and erosion. My main argument is that women's participation in politics helps stabilize democracy. Therefore, the more women in politics the more consolidated democracy will be. In this section, I summarize the implications of the research literature for my research question: what role can (or might) women play for democratic consolidation?

Women's influence on democracy through mass participation

Scholars have found political participation – “voluntary activities undertaken by mass public to influence public policy... example of these activities includes voting in elections, helping a political campaign, donating money to a candidate or a cause, contacting officials, petitioning protesting, and working with other people on issues (Michels 2011) – to be a broad and accessible way for citizens to engage with politics. Paxton argues that consolidated democracies provide all citizens with the opportunity to participate in political processes (Paxton 2000). Nevertheless, when democracies are not consolidated, women tend to be the most repressed and vulnerable out of the population. The reason for this, as Paxton explains, is that “less blood was

shed for women's inclusion and that women's political inclusion did not give rise to regime changes designed to re-exclude them" (Paxton 2000) However, a democracy has been found to be effective when all the members of society are actively participating in its processes (Paxton 2000). This is to say that without the participation of women in elections, democracies would not be properly working as governmental officials are only favoring a substantial part of society. Some may say that men in politics do not believe women play a role in neither politics nor democracy, and therefore do not cater to the female population. However, scholars who have dedicated their time to study women in politics have determined that women in politics strengthen democracy through their participation (Markham & Foster, 2021).

Women activists and democratic consolidation

Social activism is a form of participation under a democracy. It is a broad process by which individuals bring social or political change (Brenman et al., 1970). Social activism is one of the most accessible ways for citizens to participate in politics as anyone can participate in social activism and the movements it brings along (Franz & McClelland, 1994). Given the history of oppression in the political system, women have been found to have a higher participation in social activism than their male counterparts (Igielnik 2020). By mobilizing large groups of individuals in a society where their government consecutively deprive them from political rights, women have helped consolidate democracy. Women have been historically excluded from the political processes that integrate a democracy – voting, holding certain political seats, etc. – therefore, women tend to push for democracy and the protection of rights (Chenoweth & Marks, 2022). In fact, women make democracy more effective because activism allows women to protest and claim for the rights they are deprived from (Chenoweth & Marks, 2022). This is one

of the many ways democracies are held accountable. If the people cannot have access to their voting rights, it indicates to citizens that their democracy could backslide, and they should begin asking their political representatives questions (Bermeo 2016).

Through political activism, women have achieved many changes that have granted them with rights such as voting, equal employment, and more. In the United States, women fought for their rights for many years, the National Organization for Women took on the streets to claim the rights of women as equal individuals (Wolfe, 2015). Although they encountered many hardships during their journey, they were able to achieve a ban on employment discrimination, maternity leave rights, childcare centers to care for their children while they worked, tax deductions for childcare, equal education, and more (Burkett, 2020). These are accomplishments would have not been possible without the participation of women. However, when participating in social activism, women do not tend to focus on issues that only impact them. They focus on issues that embrace their male counterparts as well. In fact, Nelson states that “women have contributed significantly to articulating their own, their children’s, and society’s needs in these areas, which have often been of secondary concern for men” (Nelson 1994: 10). In other words, women have pursued political issues that men have not focused on which is one of the many reasons why women have been successful at achieving change through activism.

Women raise awareness of issues the male population do not perceive as concerning, and therefore they voice it without shame. This argument suggests that female activists play a significant role in democratic consolidation (and preventing erosion) because female activists can mobilize large segments of the population and pursue advocacy to prevent the government from holding absolute power. In fact, it has been said that women activism is more effective

because their focus is associated with human rights (Martin & Smith, 2020). Waylen explains that women activists who associate their movement with human rights and human rights organizations tend to be more effective and therefore more successful as these organizations are broader in terms of rights and therefore, they can recruit individuals from different organizations, “Early analyses demonstrated that some women and women organizations, often middle class, professional and feminist, that engage with political society have had some degree of success in achieving their goals. Others – often autonomous feminists, human rights organizations, and popular movements – have opted for less human rights interactions with political society and have been less effective in achieving their aims” (Waylen 2000). In other words, women tend to be successful at exercising their right to activism under a democracy because they fight for the government's attention on broader issues that many men would not pay attention. Women activists also play a significant role in mobilizing people who otherwise would not participate in political processes for reasons such as lack of education, impartiality, and others. It has been said that “the consolidation of more equitable political systems in gender terms is more likely if organized groups of women are lobbying institutionalized party systems both from within and from outside for the implementation of normal measures both to increase the numbers of women active at all political levels and to implement ‘women friendly policies” (Waylen 2000). In other words, activism plays a big role in democratic consolidation, but when there is support from within, their voices become stronger.

Women elites and democratic consolidation

This argument suggests that higher rates of women in politics lead to democratic consolidation because women are more likely to advocate for women's rights and constrain autocratic tendencies. Another way women are politically involved in our democracies is through representing the people. Political representation is important. Scholars have argued that "the availability of role models could help to redress the gender gap by shaping the motivation of women to run for office" (Gilardi, 2015). Therefore, female elites play a significant role in democratic consolidation and preventing erosion because they are actively motivating other women, and people whose ideas align, to be present in an important matter such as politics.

Scholars have dedicated their time to compare the importance of representation in a democratic country. If women are not represented or underrepresented in the political elite due to social or political constraints, then there is a problem of representation"^[1]. Representation is beyond having someone to look up to but more of someone who cares about certain rights women are deprived of during democratic backsliding. In a democratic society, voting decreases the chances of democratic erosion as it balances the power of the government and the people. If there's a constant number of voters, it motivates the government to create more policies and show to the public a working agenda (Clayton and Zetterberg 2021). Therefore, when women feel represented, they will feel more inclined to participate in elections which decreases the chances of democratic backsliding. Scholars have found that the "women's presence does increase the degree to which legislators prioritize women rights" (Clayton and Zetterberg 2021). This is to say that when women are present in political processes, they are more likely to advocate for issues men are less concerned about because they are not directly targeted by. Other scholars have found that when women work towards gender representation in politics" (Arana Araya et

al., 2020).

Theoretical implications of existing work and hypotheses

I derive expectations from the research literature summarized above.

First, in a comparison of democracies, those with more women in politics will be more likely to consolidate than those with fewer women in politics.

Second, if women activists play a role in democratic consolidation, then we will see more women's empowerment during successful democratic consolidation.

I explore these hypotheses in two ways. Quantitatively, I describe the development of female representation and empowerment during democratic consolidation and erosion. Qualitatively, I use a case study of the experience of the Dominican Republic to explore (1) the legacy of female activists for democratic consolidation, (2) the role of female activists in current democratic consolidation, and (3) in-depth interviews on the experiences and impressions of women with connections to the Dominican Republic about the role of women in politics.

Quantitative evidence

I first turn to quantitative evidence to probe whether female representation and empowerment are associated with processes of democratic consolidation and erosion as hypothesized.

Overview of data

I use information on democracy and the role of women in politics in over 100 countries over several decades to evaluate the hypotheses. Most of these data comes from the Varieties of Democracy project, which provides information on political institutions based on expert surveys.

Democracy

I use one of the V-Dem project's main measures for democracy: the polyarchy indicator, `v2x_polyarchy`. This measure is an aggregate index of several dimensions of democracy, including freedom of association, clean elections, freedom of expression, and others. The measure is continuous. Higher values indicate more democratic countries. Based on this variable, V-Dem also codes episodes of autocratization (or democratic backsliding) in the `aut_ep` indicator, which is set to 1 in years where countries' democracy score experienced a notable decrease. Similarly, the `dem_ep` indicator expresses a move toward more democracy.

Women in politics

To measure the role of women in politics, I rely on the percentage of female legislators, `v2lgefemleg`. This variable is measured for each country in any given year. For women's empowerment, I rely on three indices based on the V-Dem expert surveys: women's political empowerment (`v2x_gender`), women's political participation (`v2x_genpp`), and women's civil society participation (`v2x_gencs`). On each variable, higher values correspond to a stronger role of women in politics. Lastly, I use an indicator for quotas to measure whether the number of women in legislatures is set through a quota (`v2lqqugen`).

Time period and coverage

At maximum, my data cover 161 countries (including democracies and non-democracies), 1946-2019. Of these, I also analyze a sub-set of 103 democracies, 1946-2020.

Findings and discussion

The analysis of quantitative data reveals several clear patterns. Most of them are in line with my broad expectations that women are associated with democratic stabilization, but with some important qualifiers. I first examine the relationship between women in politics and democracy in general terms. Here, I broadly expect that more democratic countries exhibit higher levels of female participation in politics, both as legislators and members of political and civil processes. Scatterplots of the V-Dem democracy measure and my four measures of women in politics are consistent with this expectation, though the data exhibit considerable variance (see Figure 1). Interestingly, the Dominican Republic generally falls above the trend line especially in recent years (shown by the lighter-blue colored year indicators). This means that for its democracy level, women in the Dominican Republic were represented more than average in the legislature (though see my discussion of the quota below), women were more empowered politically than average, women were able to participate in politics more than average, and women were especially able to participate in civil society.

Next, I show that within democracies, women's participation also increases at higher levels of democracy (Figure 2). Such a relationship could suggest that more consolidated democracies see more involvement of women in politics. That said, the trend lines are flatter and the remaining variation in the data is high. Once again, and especially in recent years, the Dominican Republic ranks above average along all four measures.

Tracking the theoretical arguments more explicitly, in Figure 3 and Figure 4 I show the development of each measure of women's role in politics before and after major episodes of

democratization and autocratization. My arguments suggests that an increased role of women in politics may facilitate democratic stabilization (and thus precede episodes of democratization) and restrictions on women's role in politics can go hand in hand with democratic backsliding (or episodes of autocratization). The upward-trending orange lines in Figure 3 suggests that an increase in women's role in politics precedes episodes of democratization. In parallel, Figure 4 shows that a decrease in women's role in politics precedes episodes of autocratization (backsliding). Taken together, these trends suggest that the role of women in politics is indeed a preview of trends in democratic systems: the better women do, the more stable democratic systems become; the worse women's participation in politics becomes, the worse the prospects for democracy.

My final quantitative contribution is a regression analysis of autocratization among all countries in my data (Table 1) and episodes of democratic backsliding among democracies (Table 2). The purpose of these analyses is to show whether the presence of more female legislators is associated with episodes of backsliding. I focus on female legislators because this measure is independent of V-Dem's democracy measures. The regression analyses present two sets of estimates: comparisons within countries (does an increase in female legislators within an average country decrease the risk of backsliding?) and comparisons between countries (does a country with more female legislators face a lower risk of backsliding compared to an otherwise similar country with fewer female legislators?). Because quotas may increase the presence of women without advancing women-specific political goals (Donno and Kreft 2019), I distinguish between countries with quotas for female legislators and those without quotas.

The evidence is fairly consistent that more female legislators are associated with fewer incidents of democratic backsliding – but only in countries without quotas. These are between-country comparisons, i.e. between two otherwise comparable countries, the country with more female legislators and no quota faces the lowest risk of backsliding, and a country with fewer female legislators faces a higher risk of backsliding. These results are based on a linear probability model of backsliding episodes with basic control variables. While more research on this question is warranted, this quantitative evidence is a strong signal that (1) more female legislators serve in countries that face lower risks of backsliding and (2) this pattern does not hold in countries with quotas, thus supporting some of the argument I make above that quotas may constrain female politicians’ advocacy for democracy and rights, whether by pre-screening only loyalist legislators or otherwise constraining female legislators.

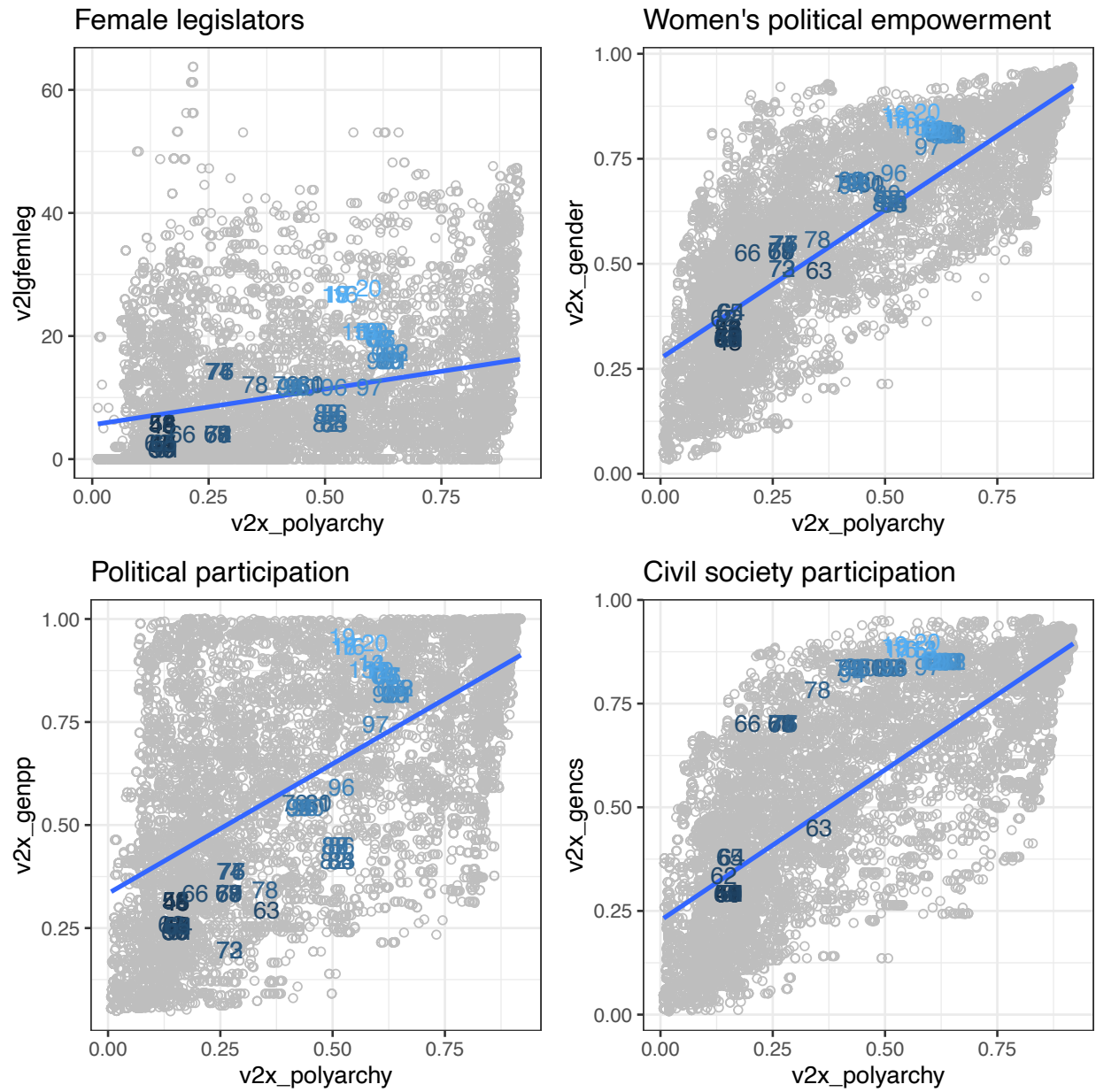
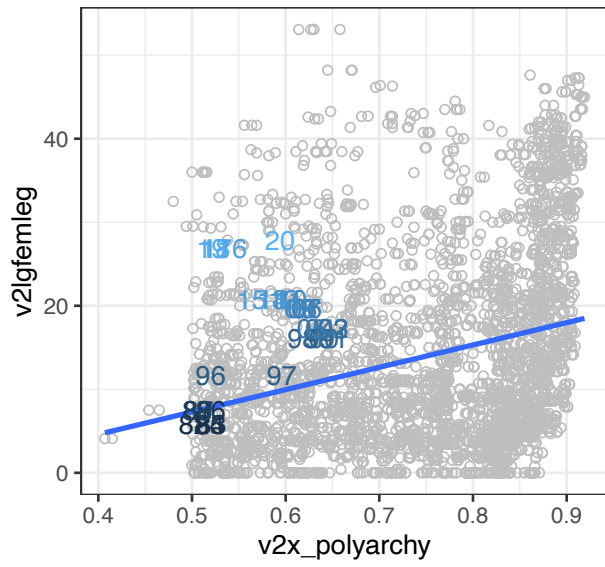
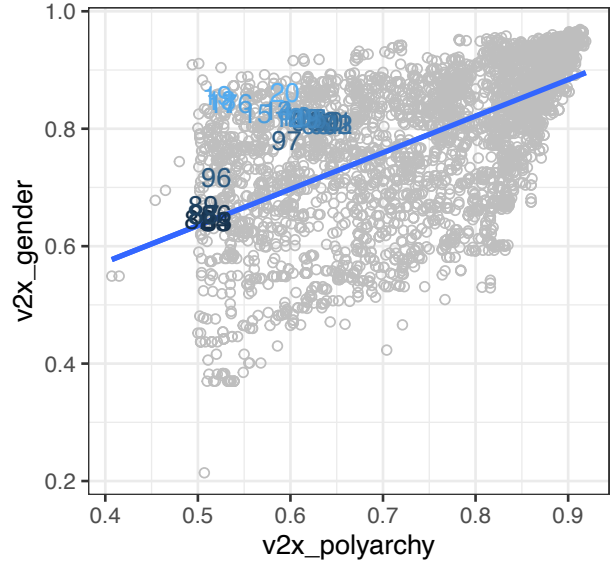


Figure 1: Women enjoy more representation and empowerment in democracies. The blue numbers show observations from the Dominican Republic, with numbers indicating the year of the observation.

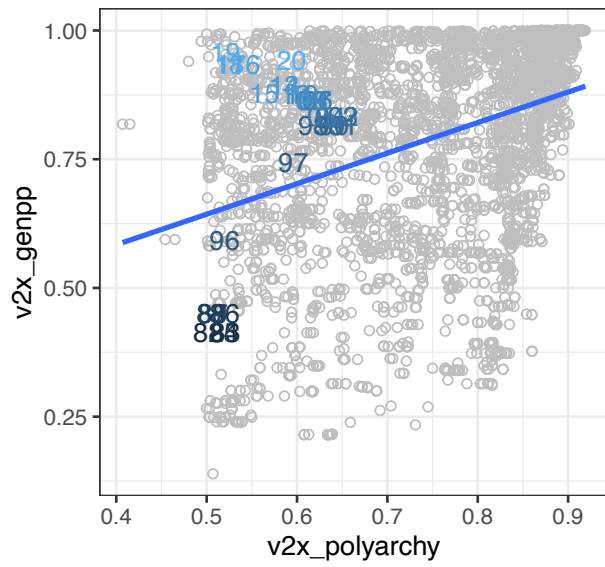
Female legislators



Women's political empowerment



Political participation



Civil society participation

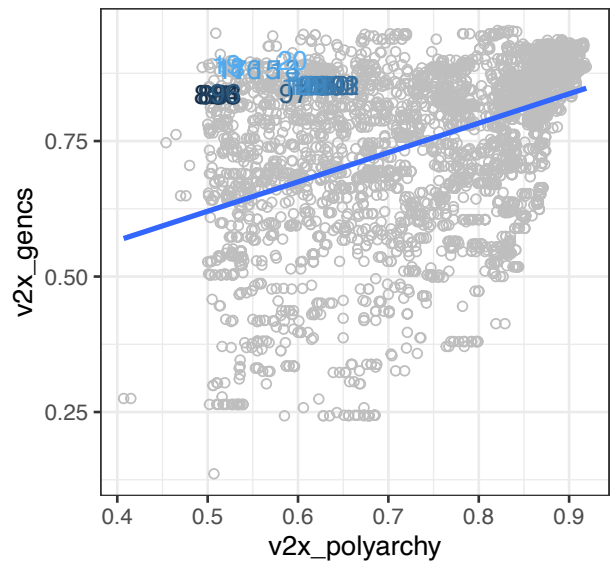


Figure 2: Within democracies, women enjoy more representation and empowerment in more consolidated democracies.

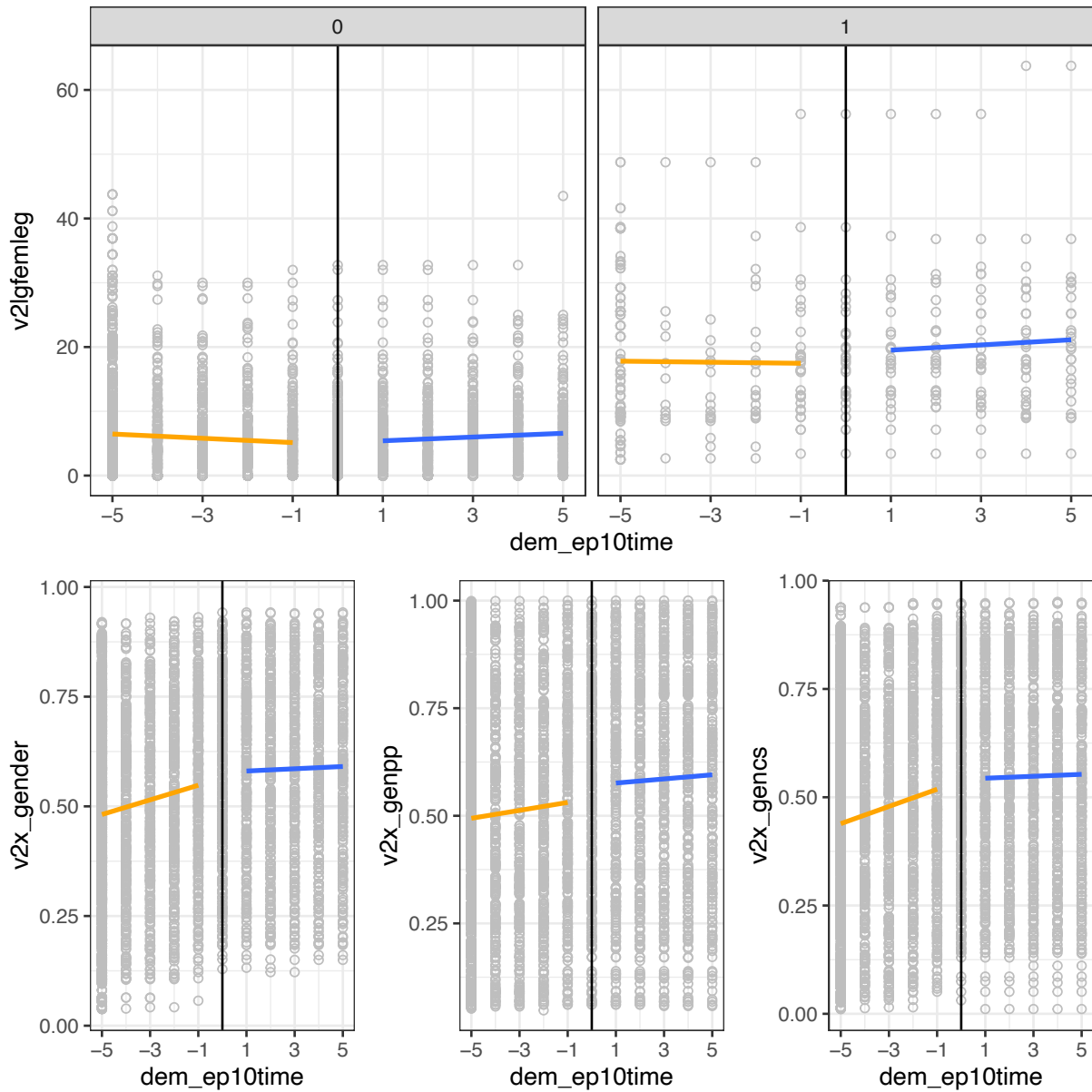


Figure 3: Women's representation and empowerment preview episodes of democratic consolidation.

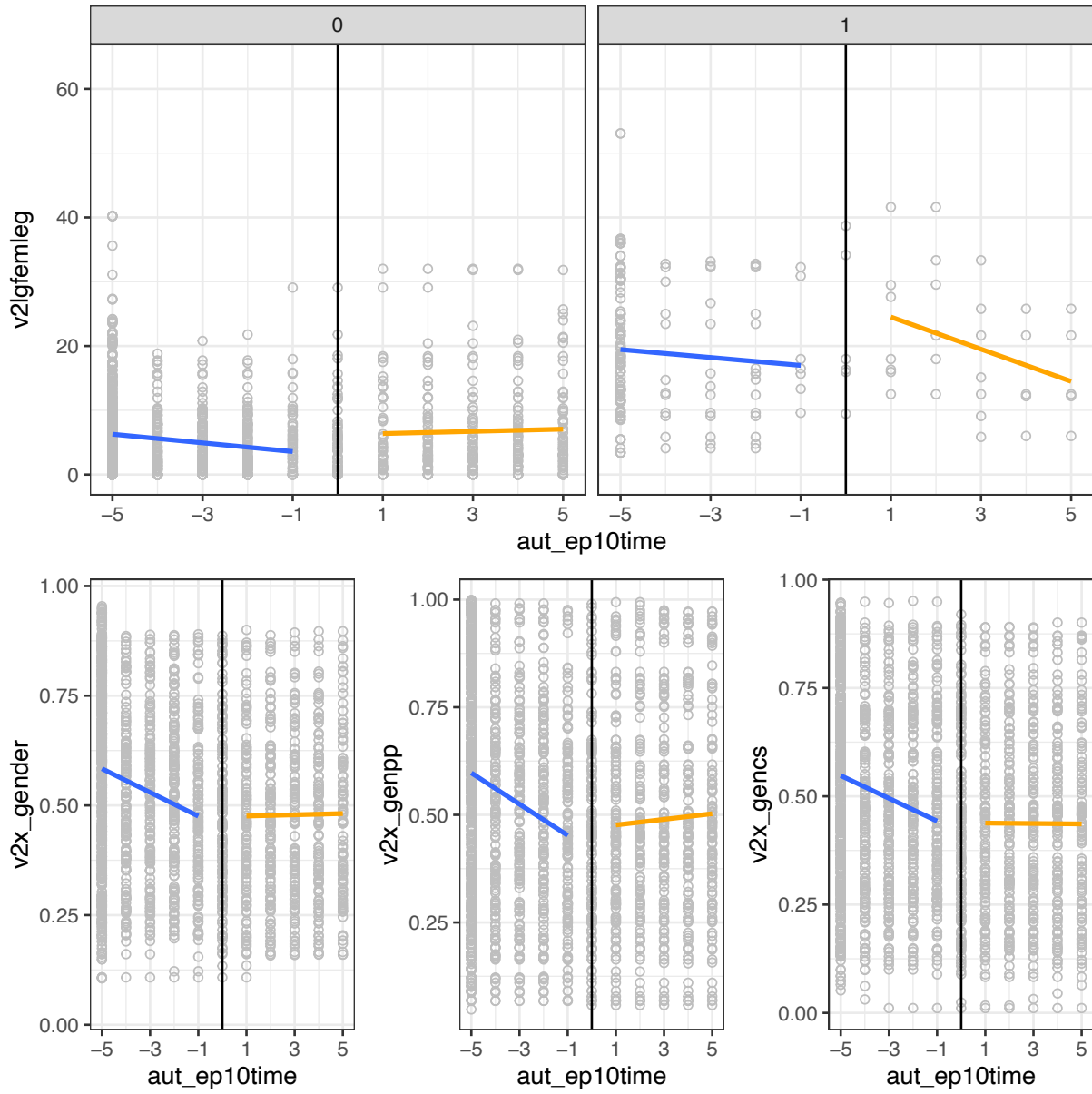


Figure 4: Women's representation and empowerment preview episodes of democratic erosion.

Table 1: Regression analysis of episodes of autocratization (democratic backsliding), all countries, 1946-2019.

	Within countries	Between countries
Female legislators	-0.13 (0.12)	-0.21 * (0.02)
Quota	-0.00 (0.05)	-0.03 * (0.01)
Democracy	0.01 (0.05)	0.02 * (0.01)
GDP growth	-0.07 (0.04)	-0.11 * (0.04)
GDP per capita	0.02 (0.02)	-0.02 * (0.00)
Female legisl. x Quota	0.49 (0.25)	0.39 * (0.05)
Country-years	8870	8870
AIC	-1707.54	-638.50
BIC	-523.43	-71.27
Log Likelihood	1020.77	399.25

Table 2: Regression analysis of episodes of democratic backsliding, all democracies, 1946-2019.

	Within countries	Between countries
Female legislators	-0.10 (0.15)	-0.14 * (0.04)
Quota	0.06 (0.06)	0.03 (0.03)
Democracy	-1.04 * (0.23)	-0.40 * (0.05)
GDP growth	0.10 (0.14)	-0.07 (0.08)
GDP per capita	0.12 * (0.04)	0.00 (0.01)
Female legisl. x Quota	0.25 (0.25)	0.27 * (0.10)
Country-years	3729	3729
AIC	-1653.11	-608.34
BIC	-974.70	-110.42
Log Likelihood	935.55	384.17

Qualitative evidence: A case study of the Dominican Republic

Next, I explore the implications of the main arguments and describe (1) the legacy of female activists for democratic consolidation, (2) the role of female activists in current democratic consolidation, and (3) the perspective of women with Dominican descent.

The experience of the Dominican Republic is a well-suited case for this study because the Dominican Republic is a newly established democracy who faced the abusive dictatorship of Rafael L. Trujillo from 1930-1961. In addition, the Mirabal sisters, three sisters who mainly dedicated their lives to activism during an era where women were highly repressed and therefore, excluded from any political processes were one of the many reasons why the dictatorship ended in the Dominican Republic.

A brief history of autocracy, democratization, and consolidation in the Dominican Republic

In the Dominican Republic, the dictatorship of Trujillo is considered history now, but Rafael Leonidas Trujillo is known for his absolute control over the Republic during his rule. Not only did he own his seat in presidency, but the country and every living body in it (Pruitt, 2021). Because of this, Trujillo felt entitled to killing many; especially those who opposed to his regime and people of color. Soon after Rafael L. Trujillo obtained a presidential seat in the Dominican Republic, he got rid of the opposition. Many were killed, kidnapped and some disappeared. He also censored the news to avoid any suspicion about his future takeover. Many express his time

as abusive; mentally and physically. Trujillo terrorized his opposition with their deaths if anyone expressed the disapproval of his regime

As a child in the Dominican Republic, we are taught the basic history of the country. It starts with the dictatorship of Rafael L. Trujillo and ends with his assassination which helped consolidate the country and the current bicameral democracy. We are also taught about many important political figures who have created an impact on the politics and the society of the country. But the two are never linked together. As I grew older, I realized the link between the consolidation of the country and the political figures who helped the country reach that point. The death of Rafael L. Trujillo did end the backsliding point of the nation. However, there were many revolutionaries, activists, and protestors who fought to end his abusive regime.

Women's fight against dictatorship and their legacy: the Mirabal sisters

The Mirabal Sisters were not only female activists who advocated for women rights, but they also marked a turning point for the Dominican Republic's political History. The Mirabal's sisters were three sisters who with courage and bravery fought to overthrow the dictatorship of Rafael L. Trujillo. The Butterflies, as the Mirabal's were known, were three sisters – Patria, Minerva, and Maria Teresa Mirabal – native from Ojo de Agua, Salcedo where they lived with their mother and father who owned land and sold goods from the land such as milk and coffee (Pruitt, 2021). The Mirabal family lived in constant fear that their source of income would be taken away as their land helped them financially, which Trujillo immediately would take away for his own wealth (Biblioteca Dominicana 2.0 n.d.). Their journey as female activists began when

Rafael L. Trujillo laid eyes on Minerva Mirabal, the middle sister on a dance night the family was invited. As a young adult, Minerva wished to be a lawyer to defend women and others from the injustices of the Trujillista regime. However, under Trujillo's regime women were not allowed to work, especially not attend law school. Trujillo made an exception for Minerva after their long dance at the party.

On November 25, 1960, the Mirabal sisters were killed by Rafael L. Trujillo (Las Hermanas Mirabal / The Mirabal Sisters and Their Fight for Freedom n.d.). Their deaths have created legacy in the Dominican Republic, it has also created agony in the country. After their death, Dominicans realized how evil the dictator Rafael L. Trujillo was towards the people. Many decided to honor their deaths and carry their legacy by standing up for what is right. The Mirabal's death marked the end of the Trujillista regime by the plan and persecution of the assassination of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo (Las Hermanas Mirabal / The Mirabal Sisters and Their Fight for Freedom n.d.). The death of the Mirabal Sisters did not only create awareness on feminist issues such as job inequality, education inequality, and other issues women faced under the Trujillista regime, but it also brought awareness to the flaws of a dictatorship. Currently, Dominicans celebrate their legacy every year on November 25th. To honor their death, Dominicans have established this day as a day of awareness against femicide and gender violence.

I have always admired the work done by these three sisters who in that era were perceived as useless and naïve. But personally, they were so clever and selfless. They risked their lives and their families for the freedom of millions of people in the Dominican Republic and the world (because Trujillo's targets were all around the world). To challenge a dictator who everyone

feared is impressive. To advocate for what's right in front of a man who ended their families lives and nevertheless set us free to a democratic nation is a major inspiration. Many do not believe the impact these women had in democracy, but their work and legacy are what brought us to the Dominican Republic we have now. It might be flawed but under Trujillo's regime, the people did not enjoy any rights, especially women. Thanks to them we have moved on to voting rights (in general because women rights was something they had to fight for later), the belief that women deserve to obtain an education and further practice law. Under a misogynistic society, they demonstrated that women are capable of defeating men in politics or that they are even smart (as that is the usual argument). The Mirabal's sisters' story is a perfect example of why women should be involved in politics as when they are not present, the government oppresses them, and abuse their power.

Female activists and democratic consolidation

As a newly established democracy, it is important to highlight the contribution of women activists as they play a significant role in democratic consolidation. In the Dominican Republic, women activists have created the opportunity for other women to voice their concerns when the government tries to suppress their rights. While they are not always successful, their movements bring along the participation of many citizens who believe they are not politically educated enough to participate in elections, or other forms of participation other than social activism. Social Activism has given the platform to many Dominican citizens to support a political topic and it has allowed them to have their voice heard through protests, walk-outs, and other forms of activism.

The history of the Mirabal sisters suggests that women have been fighting for political participation for many years. During the time of Trujillo, women activists gathered to create a

union to promote women rights, “However, scholars on authoritarianism point out that right-wing dictatorships such as Rafael Trujillo's opened the way for conservative women's activism with the aim of “organizing a totalitarian project” focused on a particular notion of the condition of women and their interests” (Manley 2019). During this time period women also brought awareness to Trujillo’s abuse through the distribution of pamphlets, community programs and other forms of activism (Manley 2019). Their efforts to avoid a dictatorship demonstrates why women are important in politics, especially during democratic backsliding. They strengthen democracy through activism which also encourages people’s participation. And participation encourages consolidation. Overall, women in the Dominican Republic played a significant role leading up to the consolidation of the country by increasing participation through the awareness of the flaws of Trujillo’s regime. Manley also explains that activism led to the increase of social programs that benefited women directly. The Revolutionary League for the Emancipation of Women focused on issues that directly impacted women such as oppression from the government. Other groups such as the Women’s Social Participation group focused on literature to motivate their activism and mobilize politicians (Manley 2019). Thanks to their work there was an increase in representation but there was also an increase in political participation. After Trujillo’s regime ended, the new president, Joaquin Balaguer, began to take into consideration these issues and opening community clubs where women had a safe space to discuss politics and social issues they were left out from before (Manley 2019).

In fact, under the newly established democracy, women have claimed that it is time to feel represented and included in the political processes of the Dominican Republic. They have also expressed how women are only considered in politics when it becomes beneficial for the politician's campaign, “the promise of parity, equity and participation of women in public

positions has been used as a political strategy and generates popular acceptance, however, what history reveals is that positions for women continue to fall below senior management”

(Hernandez 2021). In other words, men in politics use women to make the public believe they are inclusive and maintain their reputation, but women are not represented because as soon as political campaigns are over, they tend to brush over the fact that women are oppressed, deprived of rights, and underrepresented.

In 2019, the Dominican Republic fought to avoid the political presence of the Dominican Liberation Party who remained in power for over sixteen-years. Political parties along with their candidates promised women with political representation if elected for office. Nevertheless, these promises have been going on for as long as many can remember. In 2020, Luis Abinader, the presidential candidate for the Modern Revolutionary Party, promised the Dominican people 50% seats for women. But the current President has not been keeping his promises. Women in the nation have been trying to raise awareness to the gender inequality within the Dominican Republic politics. In 2019, the thirty-three deputies of the Dominican Republic joined the voices of the activists by submitting a petition to include more women in the Dominican politics by modifying the Article 36 de la Ley Organica del Regimen Electoral (Maldonado 2021).

Recently, Dominican women have taken on the streets to fight about their reproductive rights which have been at questioned by the government. Many feel as if they have been betrayed by the political promises made by the political candidate of their choice in 2020. The Dominican Republic is one of six countries in Latin America that penalizes abortions under all circumstances (Garcia-Peña 2021). Las 3 Casuales is the title Dominican women have given to their movement that defend abortions under three circumstances – rape, abortion, and health issues. This is a concern to the Dominican women and the society in general as they have

experienced the death of many young girls, and older women, who have been denied abortions to save their lives. In the eyes of many women, the deprivation of reproductive rights is beyond a law. It is a way to manipulate women and their bodies. In fact, women have expressed that the motives of this movement are to also fight against “the state-sponsored misogyny and violence against women” (Garcia-Peña 2021). This movement perceived that the political history of the Dominican Republic carries misogyny which does not only leaves women underrepresented, but also oppressed. Las 3 Casuales practice sit-ins in front of the National Palace of the Dominican Republic desperate for the attention to the issue of abortion laws and femicide in the country.

The Dominican Republic has faced a misogynistic government from the beginning of its founding years. Women activists have been working to create a more inclusive Dominican Republic by raising awareness to issues that might cause oppression. By voicing their concerns women in the Dominican Republic have increased political participation and avoided keeping an abusive political party.

Evidence from interviews: women’s perception of democracy and consolidation

To further probe the idea that women play a distinct role for democratic consolidation, I conducted a series of interview with women who have ties to the Dominican Republic. The primary goal of these interviews was to elicit these women’s views on democracy in the Dominican Republic. By asking whether their potential engagement for democracy is particularly driven by their role as women (rather than “just” citizens), the interviews help uncover some of the mechanisms that may connect women’s engagement in politics to democratic consolidation.

Selection of respondents and conduct of interviews

Eligible subjects for my sample included any women with Dominican citizenship or women who have spent a significant part of their adult life in the Dominican Republic. For my interviews, I did not require a representative sample because I am interested in in-depth experiences rather than estimating population trends. After obtaining IRB approval to conduct this research (Protocol File Number: JK-POL-Women-0122x at Ursinus College), I asked family members for contacts whom I then approached through WhatsApp. I ended up conducting three in-depth interviews, partly in person and partly through videoconference.

Subject 1

My first subject was a 38-year-old female with Dominican parents. She considers herself an active citizen because she participates in the United States elections. Her main reason to be involved in politics is because “voting counts. It gets the politicians you desire into positions. Not always is your voice heard. If you protest or boycott those are different demonstrations that you can show or say how you’re feeling or what changes are needed”. She expressed how important politics is, especially for women from low-income and marginalized communities. Her understanding of politics comes from the level of education she obtained, a bachelor's degree, and is influenced by her community in the Bronx, NY. She says that her views of politics in the United States aligned with the Democratic party because “I know they are going to look out for the people”, she says, “I always feel like Republicans are looking out for the rich people, companies, and money. I think that the only social programs the Bronx gets are through the Democratic party”. Scholars also believe that women tend to support parties on the left– or parties that uphold the same ideologies – because these parties tend to fight for humanitarian

rights, marginalized communities, and other social issues the Republican party does not cater to (Shapiro & Majahan 1986).

The first subject also expressed her views on social activism - “social activism definitely makes politics more inclusive, and I think it’s the only way you can actually count because not will always the party that you favor represent you entirely”. This is an important point. Social activism allows people to feel represented when policymakers are not aware of certain social issues. She also mentioned that “if you don’t see yourself in who’s up there then through social activism you can definitely make a difference for your own benefit”. Women have been underrepresented for many years, and it is due to social activism that they have made their voices and concerns heard. In fact, our subject expressed “I think women play a huge part in social activism and if they unite and partake in social activism and possibly reach those higher positions, I think, yea, they would have a huge impact, not only on the Dominican Republic. I think anywhere. In history, it's mostly been men taking power or having those higher positions”. Activism is the platform that expose women to influence policymakers to implement the changes people need. Without democracy, social activism would be penalized – just like in the Dominican Republic when the three Mirabal’s, Manuel Tavárez and Leandro Guzman attempted to organize a campaign to end Rafael L. Trujillo dictatorship. Instead of an answer to their cry, they were murdered by the dictator. To add on, our subject believes there is a connection between democracy and her rights, “without democracy you won't have any rights. With a democracy you can see rights” - said our subject. A more specific example she mentioned “thanks to democracy we have the choice to have a child or not. Even at the point of conception, right then and there you can decide – is it something I want to do or not? And although it is second nature to us – the rights that we have – a lot of countries don’t have that option”.

An important part of the interview with my first subject was when we spoke about gender inclusion in the Dominican Republic and the possible changes it could bring along. The subject responded: “I think if we have a female president – I don’t think there’s ever been one there – it would definitely make a big impact. Sometimes they say females are too emotional, but maybe with a female having all those emotions and compassion maybe things would be different. We would see more being done for the poor, for those children, more education, more healthcare. Accessibility to those things. That’s a good point”. Our subject believes that, in fact, women lean towards rights, marginalized communities and other social issues policymakers perceive as insignificant. Lastly, the subject mentioned that social activists Minerva Mirabal, Patria Mirabal, and Maria Teresa Mirabal – the Mirabal Sisters – have impacted the way she sees the history of the Dominican Republic. She says: “they have also continued to inspire young women in the DR to want to make a difference.” This is to say, representation is important. Especially, when women have been oppressed by a system meant to protect them and their rights. By joining politics, and participating in the political processes, citizens can make a difference.

This subject taught us that representation was important for her because coming from a low-income community, politicians often forget about them, especially women. She also pointed out that women tend to support democratic parties that align with their political values such as democrats in the United States. The story of the Mirabal sisters happened decades ago, yet women are still being inspired by their acts against a corrupt presidency. This is to say that women do have an impact on politics, and because of their accomplishments other women tend to pursue politics and seek change.

Subject 2

My second subject was a 21-year-old female with Dominican parents. She participates in politics through elections because “there is not a lot of women in politics, in general, anywhere in the US or outside of the US. So, we have just men making policies for women.” Our second subject is in her last year of her undergraduate studies, she says, “college has opened my eyes to different perspectives that are not only Democrats.” Some citizens tend to uphold ideologies based on the environment they are surrounded by, and higher education tends to challenge those ideologies as happened to our second subject. She even described democracy as an opportunity to obtain new perspectives through the election of a new president, “I would like to choose (in reference to who represents her); I like agency.” Given her education and other factors, our second subject believes that women are impacted differently than their male counterparts when laws are involved. She mentioned abortion in the Dominican Republic and how that is an issue that men are not impacted by, yet they are making laws for women.

The second subject expressed her views on social activism. First, she believes that social activism works. “You are calling where the public is calling attention to where the issue might be, and at some point, it will get to like, the politicians, or agenda.” This is the goal of social activists – to bring light to issues that are ignored, and have policymakers bring change. She even mentions an experience at a Black Lives Matter movement where she says, “there were more women than men.” In fact, she expresses “I think women do play a big role in social activism like demographics, I do feel like women have big chunk of overall percentage of the population”. This goes to show that when women participate in social activism, the movement tends to be successful at expanding the purpose, as with the Black Lives Matter movement that has brought

attention to the policymakers and accomplished minor changes. Our second subject has been inspired, politically, by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez “she is the person that actually made me aware as a woman in politics. She is the person I could connect with in politics. Hillary Clinton, I do not really connect with her because she is white. She is a woman, but she is white. She is not a minority”. This is a critical point because when communities do not feel represented in politics, they tend to refuse to participate in political processes, which may increase the chances of democratic backsliding (Mair 2013).

Our second subject pointed out the importance of democracy for women. Having an opportunity to choose who represents us is important because as new presidents come, new and updated laws come along too. She also demonstrated to us the importance of diversity in politics. Although Hillary Clinton is a woman, our subject did not identify with Clinton as a politician because of the different experiences they both have had as women in the United States. However, with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, our subject felt more seen because they both have had similar experiences such as growing up as low-income Latinas, and even sharing the same childhood neighborhood. These are factors that male politicians often overlook because they are not impacted (because usually those who represent us are older wealthy men). However, these factors play a huge role in the participation of women because as our subject mentioned someone with a similar background was who made her aware of politics.

Subject 3

My third subject was a 44-year-old female who migrated from the Dominican Republic in 2014. She holds a GED and believes that in her native country, citizens become educated in politics during their secondary education years. Although she is not incredibly involved in politics, she

tries to keep herself updated with the political events that could affect her and her family. She expresses that before migrating to the United States she participated in politics through elections. However, she is not a United States citizen and therefore, cannot participate in elections at her current residence. When voting back in her country, the Dominican Republic, she felt as if her vote mattered. She says: “voting is a right every citizen has and that’s what makes politicians make changes.” Our third subject expressed that “I don’t know what specific change my vote brought, but if I don’t do it then there will be no change.” Many scholars and politicians communicate the same phrase to the public about participating in elections because sometimes citizens participate in politics, but do not see change. However, their vote helped to balance the voice of the government and the people which tends to decrease the chances of democratic backsliding.

The third subject expressed that social activism is what makes the people’s voice heard in the Dominican Republic. “Sometimes people needed the street fixed, the water system, we would protest in the street to demand our rights and have our voices heard. We would go in front of the mayor’s office and protest for our rights. Many times, they would listen and fix stuff.” She believes that “politicians use change as a strategy when they want votes. During campaign times, they like to make promises but there is never change so when the people gather up and demand from them, and soon enough they will begin to work” Our subject says that not only does social activism work because politicians feel pressured, but the union of the people also helps the movement. We also discussed her feelings about democracy to which she responded that “democracy is important to me because that is why our voices are heard... In countries with dictatorships, women are not heard because the government assumes all the power. I have never heard Cuba with a woman in power.” To further express her views, our subject pointed out the

differences she perceives between women and their male counterparts in power. She says “women fight for rights; men fight for power. Look at the history of the United States, women had to fight for rights, children rights, students' rights, for the community, human rights, citizen rights. Those are the rights women always focus on. On the other hand, men are fighting for power. Power helps them make decisions in politics... In the Dominican Republic, the ex-president Trujillo Molina, he was so powerful and used his power to be violent towards women.”

To further understand her views on women in power, we asked our subject if any women have motivated her to learn more about politics, she says “it is really motivating for women nowadays to see women do things, especially in presidency. We see Nancy Pelosi, Kamala Harris, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. It is really motivating for women. To me is like if you have a dream – those women motivate you. They motivate you to overcome, to grow, educate yourself. To see how the work these women are doing have brought change to our education system. One woman motivates the next. That whole movement – the feminists – they have fought for what they want for the people.” Our last subject demonstrated the importance of representation in politics, especially when it comes down to women rights. As a woman who comes from a marginalized community, our subject seems to really look up to women in power and use their success as a drive to her own personal journey.

Overall, the three subjects interviewed for this project have expressed how important representation is for political participation, and therefore, the prevention of democratic backsliding. Most importantly, the subjects highlighted the significant role women play in democratic nations such as helping bring awareness to social issues, motivate. These women have highlighted the importance of feeling represented in a society where women have had to live under fights for their rights. They have also established the need for more representation in

democratic countries as their contribution is valuable to underrepresented and marginalized communities. Women participation in political processes increases mass participation in our society.

Discussion and Conclusions

This research is somewhat personal. I was born and raised in the Dominican Republic where I often felt left out as a child because politics is not something ordinary Dominicans discuss as they believe that only the wealthy and men should have a word. As time went by, I began to realize how much this forbidden topic tends to impact us, even as children. It was not until I noticed my single mother struggle to fit in a society where women depend on men, that I began to educate myself on politics and the political history of the Dominican Republic. The story of the Mirabal Sisters helped me understand that women are essential in politics and that it should not be all about men, which motivated this research. As a Dominican woman, I believe that when I am represented, I tend to dream bigger.

Women are fundamental to the development and maintenance of true democratic practice because they advocate for the usage of democratic participation. Mass participation is a way woman have made their voice heard which is a pillar to democracy – to have everyone's voice heard. Activism is recognition for the work that must be done to save democracy. To further probe this thesis, I have focused on the Dominican Republic to demonstrate the essential role that women play in pushing for democracy and human rights. From a cruel dictatorship that did not considerate women, the Mirabal Sisters began a movement to overthrow fight for inclusion. Their fight for representation and gender inclusion was the foundation to a newly established democracy in the Dominican Republic. As our quantitative data shows, women in politics have a

history of consolidating democracy, and preventing democratic erosion; when their voices are considered, and they are represented through political positions, democracy is stronger. Overall, this paper seeks to motivate women to engage with local and national elections to advocate for their rights, and the rights of others. This research is also a personal motivation to continue to speak on issues and confront those ideas that could potentially risk the quality of our democracy. My hope is that my findings push democracies to become more inclusive of women, and to provide them with equitable opportunities in politics.

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