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Political Dynasties, Term Limits, and Female Political Empowerment

Evidence from the Philippines

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The second half of the 20th century saw women break gender roles and stereotypes in all spheres of life. Despite such dramatic shifts, women are still behind in leadership positions (particularly in politics) in both developed and developing countries. In 2019, only 24.3 percent of national legislators around the world were women. Such low representation was even more severe for elected executive positions, with only 11 female heads of state.

Scholars and policymakers are interested in understanding women's pathways to elected offices. Recent studies have brought attention to structural characteristics of the political environment, including electoral systems, political competition, and the politicization of ethnicity as well as cultural norms such as matrilineality, the tracing of one's lineage through the mother's line. In parallel, a growing body of research has focused on how policies such as gender quotas and political reservations shape female political representation both substantively and descriptively.

We investigate the effect of a widely used policy on female political representation: term limits. Although the intended goal of term limits is not explicitly to improve women's representation, a plausible side effect could be a rise in female elected officials. After all, open-seat races—races where the

incumbent is not running—are known to attract outsiders and lesser-known candidates to the political scene. The search for a context to elucidate these issues takes us to the rise of female politicians in mayoral positions in the Philippines.

The Philippines ranks among the top countries in the world in terms of female political representation. Women currently hold 29 percent of the seats in the Senate and the House of Representatives of the Philippines. However, the Philippines didn't always have such a high share of female politicians. In the aftermath of the fall of Ferdinand Marcos's autocratic regime in the mid-1980s, only 9 percent of women were elected to the Senate and the House of Representatives. Other elected offices followed similar trends. Of relevance to our research, in 1988 only 9 percent of the municipalities had a female mayor, climbing to 21 percent in 2010.

We provide evidence that this increase in female political representation is linked to the term limits introduced in the 1987 constitution. Our analysis compares forced open-seat races to other races before and after term limits were implemented. We use the term "forced open-seat races" to refer to open-seat races following binding term limits and to differentiate from open-seat races in which the incumbent was eligible to run but decided not to.

First, we show that forced open-seat races are significantly

more likely to have a woman running for office and a woman being elected to the mayoral office. Our estimates suggest that term limits can account for about two-thirds of the increase in the share of female mayors in the Philippines. We next show that dynastic candidates are more likely to run in forced open-seat races and that the increase in female representation following binding term limits is entirely driven by dynastic women. While nondynastic women are slightly more likely to run in forced open-seat races, they are not more likely to win. Thus, in our context, term limits increase the share of a very specific group of women in power: dynastic women. This is a striking and unexpected result given the low share of municipalities that had a female representative to start with.

What explains this dramatic increase in the number of female dynastic politicians? Recent studies have shown that family ties are an important vehicle for women's access to politics in both developed and developing countries. If political dynasties are more likely to field female candidates, then the increase in the share of dynastic candidates in forced open-seat races may explain the rise of female politicians. However, we show that term limits also affect the gender composition of these dynastic successions. We find that the share of dynastic candidates that are female increases from 15 percent prior to binding term limits to 45 percent in forced open-seat races. A simple simulation exercise suggests that these two effects can help account for the rise of female politicians, though neither by itself can fully explain the observed change.

We provide evidence of two mechanisms that help explain why term-limited incumbents are more likely to nominate

female relatives. First, term-limited incumbents who wish to return to office after waiting one term may be more likely to select a female relative, who, given existing social norms, might be more willing to step aside after one term to restore her male relative's political career. Our data show that female relatives are three times more likely than male relatives to hold office for one term and then retire to allow the termed-out incumbent to run again. Second, we show that given their age, term-limited incumbents may be constrained in the number of eligible male relatives. In particular, if term-limited incumbents are, on average, younger than those who retire voluntarily, they may not have any sons of eligible age when the term-limit binds and may thus have to rely on their wives to keep the mayoral position in the family.

These findings highlight the importance of understanding how the cultural and social context mediates the effect of widely used political institutions such as term limits. In dynastic contexts, term limits may, perhaps inadvertently, increase female representation but restrict this higher access to office to dynastic women. And this may have important consequences for the roles that these newly elected female politicians can play.

NOTE:

This research brief is based on Julien Labonne, Sahar Parsa, and Pablo Querubín, "Political Dynasties, Term Limits, and Female Political Empowerment: Evidence from the Philippines," NBER Working Paper no. 26431, November 2019, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w26431>.