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## LETTERS

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## *The End of Machismo?* **Women in the Argentine Senate Boost Their Number Six-fold – And No One Blinks an Eye**

By Martha Farmelo

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**BUENOS AIRES**— Argentina is known more for the tango, a supremely sexy and fairly *machista* dance form, than for being in the vanguard of gender equality. Nonetheless, in 1991 it became the first country in the world to mandate the use of electoral quotas for women at the national level by all political parties. Law 24.012 requires that 30 percent of candidates for the lower house of Congress be women in what are called “electable” positions. As a result, the percentage of female deputies swelled from five percent in 1991 to 28 percent in 1995.

According to the Argentine Congress, before the October 14, 2001 mid-term elections, only four of 72 senators (six percent) were women. Imagine that for the first time, the same quota law applied to the Senate, assuring an even more dramatic outcome: a minimum of 24 female Senators, raising the percentage from six to at least 33. This is a zero-sum pie. That's at least 20 displaced men who do *not* make it to the Senate.

Imagine, too, that there is *zero* commentary on the issue. Both leading up to the elections and in their aftermath, among the vast sea of newspaper articles,



*On October 14, 2001, Buenos Aires voters make a last-minute trip to a school in our Palermo neighborhood to comply with their legal obligation to participate in the mid-term elections.*



radio commentary and generous offerings of political TV shows, there has been barely a mention of the quota law.

What in the world is going on?

The purpose of this newsletter is to explain how this affirmative action measure functions, trace how it passed in the first place and describe its impact on Argentine politics. In addition, I explore the bizarre mystery of why, at the very moment that it has transformed Argentina's law-making body, the quota law is a virtual non-issue.

### From Five to 28 Percent: How the Quota Law Works

Argentina has 24 electoral districts that correspond to its 23 provinces and the city of Buenos Aires, a federal district like Washington, DC. Each has its own constitution and electoral laws.

The October 14<sup>th</sup> election was historic, in part because for the first time Argentines chose their senators by direct vote. Previously, senators were elected by a simple majority vote in the provincial legislatures. Until this election, the 1991 quota law did not apply to the Senate. The law has applied to the House, *la Cámara de Diputados*, however, since 1993.

Argentina elects its congressional representatives using a closed-list system. When the parties' haggling is through (a thoroughly male-dominated process), the list is "closed," and the parties present a final list of candidates for each electoral district. On voting day, citizens choose a single party list. The votes for each list are tallied and seats are distributed according to the percentage of votes for each list. Thus, if a party wins four seats, the top four people on its list are elected.

Voters step into what is known as "the dark room" — which is usually a perfectly well-lit classroom filled with tables covered with piles of party lists. They are supposed to pick one ballot for the House, one for the Senate and others for municipal authorities—literally, a white slip of paper with the party name and logo at the top and a list of candidates' names—

and insert them into a single envelope. The voter then seals the envelope and inserts it into the ballot box sitting on a table, monitored by an *autoridad de mesa*, a local citizen called to public office for a day. Of course, a voter can choose one party's list for the House of Deputies and a different party's list for the Senate.

Not only does the 1991 federal quota law require that



This sampling of the winners of the October 14, 2001 Senate race shows that the quota law ensured a woman make each ticket, across the country. Notice Raúl Alfonsín, the first President after the most recent dictatorship, top row, third from the left. Notice also Vilma Ibarra, top row, second from the right. Finally, notice the second woman from San Juan, bottom right, whose presence upped the percentage of female Senators to 35 percent, five points over the goal established by law.

a minimum of 30 percent of all candidates for national parliamentary elections be women, but also that these women be placed high enough on the lists to be electable. Party lists that fail to comply with the law are rejected by the equivalent of the Elections Board.

The term “electable” is open to controversy, which was resolved by a regulation emitted by the Executive Branch in March, 1993. For each list of candidates for the House, at least every third candidate must be a woman. The lists of senatorial candidates are a bit more complex. Each district has three Senate seats. Each party puts forward two candidates for the Senate. The party that gets the most votes wins seats for both of its candidates. The party that comes in second gets one seat for its first candidate. Because the law establishes 30 percent as a minimum—zero percent is not an option—at least 50 percent of each pair of Senate candidates must be a woman.

As a result, *Alianza* coalition candidate Vilma Ibarra ran a curious (and for me, confusing) campaign ad just before the elections. Ibarra ran second on the Senate ticket with Rodolfo Terragno for the city of Buenos Aires. The rival ticket from the ARI party—a sliver behind them in the polls—included Alfredo Bravo in first place and television actress Soledad Silveyra in second. Ibarra’s ad argued that the system assured Senate seats for both first place candidates (Terragno and Bravo), so the real contest was between the women in second place (herself and Silveyra). She then attacked Silveyra as essentially vacuous, and urged voters to select the *Alianza* ticket.

### 1950s Argentina in the Vanguard of Electoral Quotas: Juan Domingo and Evita Perón

While reading leisurely and sipping grapefruit soda at an outdoor café, I learned that Argentina was actually in the vanguard of gender quotas back in the 1950s as a direct result of Evita Perón’s insistence on the greater participation of women in the political system. The motive of this legendary, attractive, astute and ambitious woman was to generate women’s unconditional support for Juan Domingo Perón, the man she married in 1945 after a year or more as his mistress. Perón was an army colonel from an immigrant, middle-class background who began to build a massive, lower-class constituency while head of the Secretariat for Labor and Social Welfare. In her autobiography, Evita said: “I realize, above all, that I began my work in the women’s movement because Perón’s cause demanded it.”

According to *Feminismo!* by historian and business-woman Marifran Carlson, unlike other Argentine politicians of just about any era, Perón recognized the importance of galvanizing the support of working-class women for his populist coalition. In 1943, women constituted one fourth of the Argentine labor force, and Perón created a Women’s Division at the Secretariat of Labor (which, in turn, organized the Pro-Female-Suffrage Commission) and promised that, if President, he would

recognize all women as first-class citizens.

In 1945, Perón sent a petition to President Edelmiro S. Farrell asking for female suffrage by decree, which enraged Argentine feminists. First, they saw his request as a cynical move to gain women’s support for a Peronist presidency. Second, they insisted that suffrage be estab-



*Evita Perón promised Argentines that enfranchisement would make women more feminine and attractive.*

lished only by Constitutional amendment so that it would not be at risk of annulment by a subsequent President.

Perón was elected in 1946 in one of Argentina’s most honest elections. He gained 54 percent of the vote, despite opposition from all the national political parties. After a few months in office, he and Evita presented a female-suffrage bill to Congress, and had the votes to pass the bill. Evita organized huge suffrage rallies at which she promised Argentines that after enfranchisement, women would not become masculine or overbearing, but rather more feminine and attractive. On September 27, 1947, Congress granted Argentine women the right to



*Evita and Juan Domingo Perón. In her autobiography, Evita states that her incursion into politics was motivated solely by her desire to support Perón.*

vote—20 years after the small, eastern province of San Juan, 15 years after neighbors Brazil and Uruguay, and 14 years before Paraguay.

Not a single feminist leader came out to celebrate. After decades of arduous campaigning and numerous bills presented (especially by Socialist legislators), they had been rotundly rejected by the mass of working class women who, rather than join their movement, pledged their loyalty to a demagogue.

*Excerpts from a speech given by Eva Peron in Buenos Aires on May 4th, 1950 at a lunch in her honor held by the Peronist Feminist Party:*

I am grateful...to the members of the Peronist Feminist Party for this symbolic act, because it also allows us to join forces...and get to know each other better in this enterprise that we have initiated of collaborating with and supporting General Perón. And because he has as his spinal cord the working class, we want to be one of the vertebrae of that marvelous column upon which he rests and with which General Perón works so calmly....[As we recruit women to Perón's party,] we must be tolerant...we must be persuasive and take forward the doctrine, not just preach it but also practice it, with love, with a spirit of abnegation and renouncement...Let's be a powerful vertebra of that column of workers that silently but tenaciously displays daily its faithfulness and its love for General Perón.

Meanwhile, Evita also insisted on gender quotas, and

beginning in the early 1950s the Peronist party gave women a third of party and electoral positions. As a result, in 1955, 22 percent of the Chamber of Deputies were women—among the highest in the world—a consequence of the use of quotas combined with her husband's party's electoral success. After Perón was deposed by a military coup in 1955, the number of women in Congress began a steady decline.

#### **Cut to 1990: With a Bit of Foreign Influence and Unusual Feminist Unity, the Quota Bill is Passed**

Around late 1989, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (Foundation) funded a series of meetings in Buenos Aires to stimulate discussion of quota laws in hope of spurring movement in that direction in Argentina. The Ebert Foundation is a public-interest institution funded by German governments and committed to the principles and values of social democracy.

Also around that time, the periodic Latin American *Encuentro Feminista*, or Feminist Conference, was held in Argentina. During this meeting, delegates launched networks of feminist politicians of all parties at the regional and national levels. The creation of a multi-party coalition in Argentina was timely.

In November 1989, the late Senator Margarita Malharro de Torres from the centrist Radical party in Mendoza presented the quota law, known in Spanish as *la Ley de Cupo*. A serious public debate erupted. The principal arguments against the bill echoed traditional opposition to affirmative action: that there are not enough qualified women candidates and that



*The Argentine House of Deputies. This body passed the 30 percent quota law in the wee hours of November 7, 1991.*

quotas constitute reverse discrimination.

“We also know that those who are going to decide here are the deputies that are present, and I don’t need to clarify that the immense majority are men. It is worth saying that we are at your mercy; you are the ones who are going to decide whether this grand desire of Argentine women from all political sectors will become a reality or not.”

*“También sabemos que quienes van a decidir aquí son los diputados que estamos presentes, y no necesito aclarar que la inmensa mayoría son hombres. Vale decir que estamos a merced de ustedes; ustedes son los que van a decidir acerca de si esto que constituye el gran deseo de la mujer argentina de todos los sectores políticos, se hace o no realidad.”*

—Deputy Florentina Gómez Miranda  
(Radical) from Buenos Aires, House of Deputies  
Debate on law 24.012, November 6, 1991

At the same time, for the first time since the end of the most recent dictatorship in 1983, activists from a wide spectrum of parties, ideologies and non-governmental organizations overcame their deep-seated conflicts to coalesce around this bill. Using a tactic that had worked in at least one Scandinavian country, these women called upon their congressmen to claim that their rival party was about to beat them to the punch by announcing support for the bill. Working together, these feminists maintained a tireless, sustained lobby in support of this measure. Then-President Carlos Menem is also credited with mobilizing support for the bill, probably to shore up his own political power.

The legislation was approved by the Senate in 1990 and passed on to the House. The night of November 6, 1991—almost 40 years to the day after Argentine women voted for the first time—the Congress was filled with exhausted but determined feminist activists whose buddies in the Congress had gotten them passes to the gallery. The President of the House threatened more than once to suspend the debate if the women in the gallery didn’t control their booing and cheering. In the wee hours of November 7, yelps of jubilation filled the chamber when the House passed the bill with 143 votes in favor, a mere seven votes opposed, and three abstentions.

### Whoops! What Have We Done? Many of the Guys Wake Up to Reality

The first election in which the law applied took place in October, 1993. It was only then that many male politicians understood exactly how the quota law worked, and its zero-sum implications: for each woman included on a

list, a man is excluded. During the six months preceding the election, more than 30 lawsuits were filed to force the various parties to comply with the new rules. Many of these were spurred by the National Women’s Council (*Consejo Nacional de la Mujer*), the government agency responsible for promoting public policies that ensure equal opportunities for women and men.

After the 1993 election, María Merciadri de Morini, a feisty, older candidate from Córdoba (and, in 1973, the first female Congresswoman from the Radical party), took her case all the way to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States. Her legal recourse within Argentina had been exhausted when the Radical party placed women in the fourth and sixth positions on their party list and the Supreme Court refused to provide remedy. On March 8, 2001 (the date was selected on purpose—International Women’s Day), Merciadri de Morini and Argentine government officials signed a settlement. This document recognized that in December, 2000 the government had issued a new regulation of Law 24.012 that both explained how the quota would apply to Senate elections and clarified the unconstitutional-



The late Deolindo Bittel, right, with Eduardo Menem, a Senate Colleague.

“Of course, I do not want to disagree with my colleagues in the party, but it would be cowardly on my part if I did not make my voice heard in favor of this law...I don’t want to disagree with my colleague, Sánchez, who is looking at me as if to say, ‘What’s going on with you, boy?’”

*“Por supuesto, no quiero discrepar con mis compañeros de bancada, pero sería una cobardía de mi parte si no hiciera oír mi voz en apoyo de este proyecto de ley...No quiero discrepar con el compañero Sánchez, que me mira como diciendo ‘Que te pasa, muchacho?’”*

—The late Senator Deolindo Bittel (Peronist)  
from the province of El Chaco, Senate Debate on  
law 24.012, September 20, 1990

ity of lists that fail to comply with the quota law.

In the case of Merciadri de Morini and in several others, Dr. Enrique V. Rocca, member of the Argentine *Cámara Nacional Electoral* (like the National Elections Board), distinguished himself as the sole vote in favor of the women in question. In his dissent, he recalled the 30 percent quotas used by the Peronist Party in the 1950s and cited current statistics for provinces across the country to demonstrate that women repeatedly comprise more than 50 percent of registered voters. He also rendered homage to prominent women politicians in Argentina and other countries of the world, among them Indira Gandhi, Golda Meir, Corazón Aquino, Margaret Thatcher and Nicaragua's Violeta Chamorro.

### So what? The Effect of the Quota Law on Argentine Politics

The quota law had immediate repercussions throughout Argentine politics, and continues to do so today.

#### *Increased legislation promoting "women's interests."*

Research has documented that women legislators are more likely than their male colleagues to represent women's interests and to support legislation that is beneficial to women. In Argentina, one of the first examples of post-*Ley de Cupo* legislation was the November, 1994 passage by the lower house of a national law to create the Responsible Procreation Program. This bill would have obliged the government to prioritize the sexual health of its citizens, including provision of free contraceptives. After passage in the post-*cupo* House, it languished in the Senate—though after the most recent election, the fate of this and a host of other legislative initiatives is likely to be more positive.

Women deputies were also key in passing the 1999 law that modified the Penal Code with regard to sexual violence, and which did not languish in the Senate. Most importantly, the new law made rape a crime against one's sexual integrity—regardless of gender—rather than a violation of a woman's *honestidad* (honor or virtue). Previously, as in many other Latin American countries, by definition a woman could not be raped by her husband, and if the rapist of an unmarried woman offered to marry her, the mere offer would get him out of a jail term. Furthermore, by definition, no prostitute could be raped, since supposedly she had no *honestidad* to be violated. In addition to eliminating these anomalies, the new law redefined as sexual assault a number of behaviors such as forced oral sex, increasing the penalty accordingly.

In fact, the law was presented (for the second time) in 1998 shortly after the public had been outraged by the case of a taxi driver who forced a woman to perform oral sex and got only eight months of jail time, prompting a fierce debate about his punishment. *Página/12*, a well-read, left-of-center daily, then published an exposé-style

"When we as Peronistas have to talk about this topic we remember, in the first place, [Eva Perón], and we render her homage. As well, when one talks about making laws to eliminate a discrimination, I have the sensation that these laws, rather than putting a discrimination to the side, are committing one...A few days ago I saw on television a representative of the homosexuals who said that they had been marginalized, and, too, with every right given them by the Constitution, tomorrow they could come to this body to solicit their participation. And we are not going to be able to say no because we are setting a precedent here."



Oraldo Norvel Britos

*"Cuando los Peronistas tenemos que hablar de este tema recordamos, en primer lugar, a [Eva Perón], y la homenajeamos. Así también, cuando se habla de que se hacen leyes para borrar una discriminación, me da la sensación de que esas leyes, en lugar de dejar a un lado una discriminación, la cometen...Hace pocos días vi por televisión a un representante de los homosexuales que decía que habían sido marginados, y también, con todo el derecho que les da la Constitución, podrían mañana dirigirse a este cuerpo para solicitar su participación. Y nosotros no nos vamos a poder negar porque estamos dejando aquí un antecedente."*

—Senator Oraldo Norvel Britos, Peronista from the province of San Luis, Senate Debate on law 24.012, September 20, 1990

spread, accusing the Senate of being *machista* for holding up the bill. As well, then-Radical congresswoman Elisa "Hurricane" Carrió (see MJF-1, page 6) called the head of the Senate to declare that she and her female colleagues in the House, together with the leaders of the feminist movement, would sit-in at the Senate with hundreds of women and raise hell until the bill passed. Her threat was likely an empty one, but it worked. The bill passed in May 1999.

*The Argentine constitution is transformed into a tool protecting women from all forms of discrimination.* One of the most powerful examples of the ripple effect of this law is the rewriting of the Argentine constitution in 1994, spurred by then-President Menem's thirst for a second term (which he, indeed, pulled off—previously terms were five years with no re-election). As per the quota law, 80 (26 percent) of the 305 members of the Constituent Assembly were women. As a result of their participation, the new constitution includes the entire Convention on

the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, CEDAW defines what constitutes discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination. It has yet to be ratified by the U.S. Congress.

The new constitution requires the state to legislate and promote affirmative steps to guarantee equality of opportunities for and treatment of women—which also establishes constitutionally that affirmative action for women is not discriminatory. (This development helped shore up a class-action suit against the city of Buenos Aires that resulted in an increase to 50 percent in the number of spots open to women at a night-school training program for physical-education professionals.) Finally, the new constitution establishes the state's responsibility to guarantee the real equal opportunity of women to reach elected and party positions and determines that future measures may not be inferior to those in place at the time of the new constitution, *i.e.* the 30 percent federal quota law described above.

Feminists cite yet another ripple effect of the constitutional process: the generation of a public debate on the question of a woman's right to terminate a pregnancy, even though this right was not incorporated into the new constitution. In a country where abortion is so taboo it is essentially off the table, many activists consider this debate a major leap forward in moving people to think more critically about this thorny issue.

**Gender quotas in the provincial legislatures.** Unlike the 50 United States, the Argentine provinces use a variety of systems to elect their provincial legislators. Presently, 22 of the 23 provinces have some sort of quota law similar to the national law (though some provincial quotas preceded the national one) and one quarter of provincial legislators are women. Across the country, the results have been uneven, mostly because of two factors. Keeping in mind that women are usually placed in every third spot on the party lists (and not above), if the system allows for party sub-lists, the number of seats won per list can be tiny, which works against women. Also, if the geographical district in question is small, the number of seats up for grabs is likely to be small, which, again, works against women.

In late 2000, the provinces

of Santiago del Estero and Córdoba adopted electoral quotas of 50 percent. Unlike the national law, many provincial laws say that “neither of the two sexes may exceed 66 percent of the positions in question”—guaranteeing that no list be comprised entirely of women. As at the national level, many of the female candidates are the sisters, daughters, wives or lovers of important male politicians. Others are elected entirely on their merits. Marta Cardoso, a Peronist from the vast, central province of La Pampa, was “just” a teacher when first elected to the provincial legislature. Today she is La Pampa's well-respected Minister of Social Welfare.

**Quotas in the labor movement—well, not quite yet.** Over the last couple of months, the Labor Committee of the House has been studying a bill that would apply a quota law to the myriad organizations that make up the Argentine labor movement. Throughout their history and today, union leadership here has been altogether male-dominated, despite the growing numbers of women in the rank and file. (One highly visible exception is the national teacher's union, the CTERA, headed by Marta Maffei.) This bill would require that all union committees that negotiate collective bargaining agreements include the same percentage of women as female workers in that sector (unionized or not). It would also require that electable candidates for leadership positions include 30 percent women, or that the quota correspond to the percentage of female workers in that sector, if less than 30.

I asked Patricia Arnalda and Rolando Julián Bompadre, two sharp, committed, young aides to the President of the Labor Committee, about the nature of



Congressional aides Patricia Arnalda and Rolando Julián Bompadre (right) and a co-worker, Bernardo, in front of the National Congress. Patricia and Rolando filled me in on a bill that would apply gender quotas to the entire labor movement—someday.

the debate around this bill. These two lawyers, migrants from the province of La Pampa, looked at each other and laughed, but sadly. “Debate? What debate?,” said Patricia. “We sent this bill to the three main labor confederations for their comments, and the two CGTs refused to respond—the *Confederaciones Generales de Trabajo*, the Peronist groups. Only the CTA replied, the *Central de los Trabajadores Argentinos*, which is more progressive.” (The CTA was created in 1992 by a group of union leaders that wanted to create a non-partisan federation that would oppose Menem’s structural adjustment policies.)

“We can’t even get the committee members to sign off on this bill,” Rolando continued, clearly as committed as Patricia to this legislation. “Just like the CTA, above the table, they say they support it, but under the table they do not. They are suddenly unavailable when we bring it around for their signature, or claim that they can’t move forward without an opinion from the confederations, even though they’ve had plenty of opportunity to opine. This bill will not make it through the Congress this year.”

*A court ruling requires the Buenos Aires Bar Association to adopt quotas—definitively.* In addition, based

on the 1991 law, federal judge Ernesto Martinelli recently ordered the *Colegio Público de Abogados* (Public College of Lawyers) of the city of Buenos Aires to adopt a 30 percent quota for women in their internal elections. One of the elated plaintiffs was quoted as having felt like “swimmers in the desert. We didn’t even have the support of the women lawyers, except for a few such as Alicia Oliveira, the ombudsman for the City of Buenos Aires.” Another said that since presenting the case, both male and female lawyers no longer greet her when they see her. The head of the College admitted that Judge Martinelli convinced him to refrain from appealing because their case has no merit. In his ruling, Martinelli made reference to the incorporation of CEDAW into the 1994 constitution to justify his decision.

### **The Consequences of This Provocative Affirmative Action Policy Are Totally Ignored: Why?**

On October 14, 2001, 25 of 72 national senators elected were women. As per the law, in all provinces but one, one of the three senate seats was won by a woman. In the province of San Juan (where women won the vote 20 years before it was instituted nationally), both the second majority seat *and* the minority seat were won by women, pushing the percentage of women in the Senate up to 35 percent—five points over the quota established by law. I still can’t get over the virtual silence on this radical change. What explains this hush?

*Near-total ignorance of the law.* Over the last couple of months, I have been asking just about everyone I can if they are aware of the *Ley de Cupo*, and, if so, what they think about it.

To my surprise, most people have only a vague notion of the law, at best. Each afternoon, my partner Alan or I stand on the broken sidewalk outside Camilo’s pre-school as the teacher’s assistant on duty at the huge, ornate colonial doors scans the group of arriving parents and calls out the names of our kids. One afternoon, as I chatted with the mother of María Laura, one of Camilo’s classmates, I asked if she was aware of the quota law. “Oh yeah,” she said, squinting at the jacaranda tree just down the way. “There is something having to do with the number of women in government positions, I think appointed positions.”

“Well, almost,” I thought.

I brought up the topic one day in the middle of a swim at my pool downtown. When I came up for air, I realized that the svelte young woman in the red bathing suit resting at the end of the lane was engaged in an intense discussion on whom to vote for in the upcoming elections with two female instructors standing in the humid



*Picking up Camilo at pre-school is always an opportunity for a quick political discussion.*

poolside air. After another two or three laps, I asked my fellow swimmer if they had indeed been talking about the elections and if she knew anything about the quota law. “No, I know there’s something, but not really.”

“Not even what the percentage is?,” I asked.

“Oh yeah, I think it’s 30 percent.”

“Hmmm,” I replied, then smiled and introduced myself.

One day I asked a well-dressed, male real estate agent who replied, “Yes, there is a quota. Little by little women have been gaining a space for themselves,” but he quickly changed the subject.

I posed the same question to a woman in her mid-twenties who blurted out, “Ay, don’t ask me. I’m a biologist! I have no idea. You should ask a lawyer.”

**Blackout in the press.** Meanwhile, since the day we arrived, I have anxiously scanned the press for mention of the quota law. After weeks of scanning hundreds if not thousands of newspaper articles, I have seen a total of four that refer to the law. One mentioned a male member of the electoral list for the House of the *Socialismo Auténtico* party—comprising 50 percent women—who appeared in public dressed as a woman. Another was an article entitled “The Senate Will Never Be the Same.” Of a 21-paragraph story, three short paragraphs describe women as the main protagonists of the upcoming Senate, who “plan to bring something more than a bit of perfume.”

Alan and I watch at least one political commentary show on TV each weeknight and buy a handful of magazines with political analysis each week. How many mentions of the quota law there? Zero. None.

I’ve asked a couple of dozen people to opine about this lack of commentary just when 25 women were elected to the Senate, an indisputably historic change. In many instances, people literally threw up their hands, scrunched up their mouths and noses and lifted their shoulders. Many people, including political scientists and lawyers who do anti-discrimination work, replied candidly, “That is an excellent question. I don’t know.”

One lawyer said, “Hell, here we don’t debate anything.”

“That is simply not true!,” I countered.

He agreed.

Carlos, the manager of our apartment building, is extremely well-read and full of opinions. He thinks that the election of so many women law-makers is a non-event

because male politicians are not threatened by their female counterparts. He believes they think, “They won’t get anywhere anyway, so who cares? Let them in.” His answer makes sense, in part. Women representatives tend to be excluded from the more important committees, leadership positions and behind-the-scenes deal-making. On the other hand, every woman who is elected displaces a male who could have been a congressman.

### Argentina in the Vanguard, But Not Alone

Argentina is in the vanguard of this type of gender affirmative action, but is by no means alone. At least one of the major political parties now uses a quota rule in countries as diverse as France, Israel, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, South Africa, Spain and Sweden. Since 1998, several countries including Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Italy, Pakistan and Peru have implemented gender quota laws that are national laws rather than internal party rules. However, these laws have not always had the desired effect. In Brazil, the percentage of women in the Congress actually dropped from seven to six after the implementation of a quota law that failed to require that female candidates appear in electable positions.

A few individuals have tried to argue that Argentina is used to women in positions of power and that in some ways, the outcome of the recent election is “natural.” However, more than double that number of people have made clear to me that, “No, no, no. This is *not* natural in Argentina. We are still fundamentally a *machista* society, despite the gains made by women.”

An explanation offered by my Argentine father-in-law, Zeke, is one of the most intriguing. “The media makes public opinion,” he says. “Powerful, *machista* men control the media. They would rather downplay a development that they do not support. By not covering it, they deny it importance.”

### Eclipsed by Blank Votes and Write-ins: the Dominant Story and Real Victor of These Elections

The taxi driver that picked me up one day in a pouring rain subtly echoed Zeke’s analysis. “They’d rather write about the tremendous *voto en blanco*,” the avalanche of blank votes that distinguished this election from any other in recent history. Before and after the elections, day after day in all the newspapers, reporting on this phenomenon filled page after page.

Leading up to the elections, blank votes and write-ins led the polls in an eye-opening number of important races. Those women at my pool discussing the elections embodied the voice of the angry voter: all politicians are liars and thieves, we’re pissed and we’re not going to

vote for anyone. One of the swim instructors told me later that she picked up a couple of lists, ripped them in half and stuffed them inside her envelope. Politicians—and all who work in politics—in Argentina are absolutely *desprestigiados*, which means disparaged and discredited.

Rolando, the congressional aide, told me, “One weekend back when Congress was open seven days a week, I was called into work on a Sunday. I got all dressed up in suit and hailed a taxi near home. When I heard what the driver had to say about politicians, I had him drop me off three blocks away. I told him I was meeting a friend and had to go to a wedding.” Both he and his colleague Patricia get so barraged with vicious criticism from taxi drivers that they now routinely have them drop them off a few blocks from the Congress.

Is it just corruption that make people so furious? “Corruption and privilege,” said Patricia. “And given the crisis,” she added, “to have a decent job that includes vacation and benefits is considered a privilege.”

In addition to blank votes, write-ins got serious attention, and rightly so. Because Argentines vote by putting a list in an envelope, a record number of home-made ballots were generated and marketed, some written by hand but even more printed in bulk with fancy photos and slogans. There were even internet campaigns exhort-

ing young people to print-out pre-fab ballots and write-in all kinds of characters, including Clemente, a striped, comic-strip duck: since he has no hands, he might not steal.

Argentines adore black humor of the darkest ilk, which explains why a number of voters also selected Osama bin Laden—in jest. I was surprised and offended when I first got wind of this ballot, until I heard a sick but true bin Laden story.

Several weeks ago, an airplane skidded off the runway at the Aeroparque airport along the river. No one was hurt. One passenger interviewed on television was asked if he was frightened. “No, not really, but on my way out of the plane, I asked the pilot, ‘Hey, who trained you anyway? Bin Laden?’” I confess that I laughed harder than I have in a long time. Only in Argentina.

I told a group of Argentines that if those planes had crashed into two Buenos Aires skyscrapers instead of the Twin Towers, no one would be making such a joke. They insisted that the contrary is true, and, actually, I think they’re right.

A number of Argentines I spoke with were genuinely anguished about how to vote. Guadalupe, the woman in the red bathing suit in the pool that day, was tempted to submit an empty envelope, but felt that it is her civic duty



Photo by Ana D'angelo



Photo by Jorge Larrosa

(Above) Argentines campaigned for Clemente. As he has no hands, he might not steal. (Top right) In a more angry vein, the top most ballot on this pile says *Hijos de Puta*, sons-of-bitches. (Bottom right) Argentines adore black humor. Hence the ballots for bin Laden.

to weigh in on who runs her country.

A thirty-something lawyer told me that he and his colleagues had long discussions about the ethics and politics of blank votes. Strategically, many see no purpose in individual blank votes, but think there is a valid political purpose in joining a huge percentage of the electorate voting in protest. In the end, he voted for Senate, but voted *en blanco* for the House. The reason? "It's simple. I could stomach a couple of the senatorial candidates, but I could not find a candidate for the House that I could consider supporting." Even some who are particularly committed to fostering democratic institutions—including activists who worked on the 1994 constitution—were thinking seriously of voting *en blanco*.

In the end, blank votes and write-ins reached record-setting proportions. This was especially true in the province of Santa Fe and the city of Buenos Aires, where these "negative votes" beat the first place Senate ticket. In Buenos Aires, Rodolfo Terragno and Vilma Ibarra of the *Alianza* coalition were beaten by negative votes 27 to 21 percent. Absenteeism also made the news at 30 percent.

Argentines are required to vote by law. Although the fine for not voting is a pittance and rarely imposed, most Argentines vote anyway. This causes a curious contrast to the United States. In the last U.S. election, only 51 percent of voters turned out to cast their ballots—but this level of absenteeism is standard, and even in extraordinary situations like our last presidential election, generally gets little or no press.

Here, absenteeism figures in the post-election calculus of support for various tickets. Officially, a blank or write-in vote does not count against the actual candidates. The percentage of votes per list is calculated using the total number of "positive votes," and blanks or write-ins are ignored. However, numerous electoral victories are analyzed in terms of both the official percentage of votes won, and the *actual* (lower) percent of votes won, taking into account absenteeism, blank votes and write-ins.

Argentina is in the throes of political change. Its basic democratic institutions are in turmoil, and in the wake of the elections, some are even suggesting that President Fernando de la Rúa should resign. No one I asked ventured a negative evaluation of the incursion of so many women into the Congress, and many offered an upbeat opinion. I heard echoed several times—always by men—the notion that women are morally superior to men and more committed to whatever they undertake and that perhaps their "untainted" presence will help lift Argentina out of its political and economic crisis. This assertion inevitably spurs a lively debate. We shall see. □

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