



Taking diverse backgrounds into account in studies of political ambition and representation

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ABSTRACT

Men from elite backgrounds dominate the group of people who seek and hold political office. We discuss the ways that homophily of backgrounds and networks can damage the quality of democracy. In doing so, we argue that broadening and deepening discussions of legislative diversity are essential to making arguments about who should seek political office. We then introduce a comprehensive and flexible measure of diversity of political leadership that allows scholars to take intersecting identities into account simultaneously. Using a dataset of legislators' backgrounds in national and provincial office in Argentina, we test the adaptability of the measure to different institutions – such as legislatures and legislative committees – that vary substantially in their size. Our results uncover enclaves of legislative politics that are the most and least diverse and, in doing so, demonstrate the need to recruit and select representatives from a wide set of background characteristics to improve democracy.

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Legislators' personal lives and backgrounds have a variety of implications for political representation. An extensive and growing body of research demonstrates that a legislator's gender, race, ethnicity, class, and even their parental status shape their priorities and decisions in political office (Burden 2007; Schwindt-Bayer 2011; Carnes and Lupu 2015; Sharrow et al. 2018). Despite substantial evidence as to the importance of descriptive representation, legislators worldwide tend to be drawn from a narrow group of citizens – disproportionately representing upper-class men from the dominant racial or ethnic group (Best 2007; Hughes 2011; IPU 2015).

We argue that understanding how multiple forms of diversity interact and emerge is the next step in the extant scholarship on access to political institutions and power. A robust and nuanced scholarship on intersectionality – particularly focused on women of color in the United States – points to the need to understand multiple forms of identity simultaneously (Crenshaw 1989; Bejarano 2013; Brown 2014; Farris and Holman 2014; Holman and Schneider 2018). As Hancock (2007) points out, intersectionality implies “*both* a normative theoretical argument *and* an approach to conducting empirical research that emphasizes the interaction of categories of differences” (63). The methods of

intersectional analysis have advanced considerably in the past 20 years, such that Choo and Ferree (2010) have identified three different scholarly approaches to the study of multiply marginalized groups: group-centered, process centered, and system centered (130). We take a system centered approach, examining how diversity emerges within political bodies. These scholars have moved us forward a considerable distance, but the methods appropriate for the study of how identity shapes the behavior or beliefs of an individual or a group of individuals are less useful when looking at diversity within an entire body. Indeed, our studies of how diversity emerges in political bodies is often hampered by the central approaches, which look at single – or one set of overlapping categories – of experience or identity. From this, it is unclear the degree to which a general level of legislative diversity exists across political institutions or how demographic, institutional, and political factors shape this (lack of) diversity.

Here, we present a method of examining diversity through a holistic approach, using professional backgrounds as a test of how multiple forms of identity can interact. We borrow from research on demographics and politics (Hero and Tolbert 1995; Hero 2000) to measure a *probability of diversity* that can be adapted to account for however and wherever a researcher might want to measure diversity. Similar to measures of ethnic fractionalization or party fragmentation, this approach captures the overall level of diversity in a unit or organization. Specifically, the measure we use generates the probability that if we drew two legislators from the same chamber they would have similar professional backgrounds. In this piece, we focus on professional diversity, incorporating information on legislators' previous involvement in public, private, party organization. We discuss the measure and exercise it across two different settings – a national legislative body over time and committees within that legislative body. We use Argentina as an example of a case that is typically thought of as having little diversity, given the extremely high level of racial homogeneity in the country. In doing so, we show that using alternative approaches to measuring diversity can provide us with ways of understanding how identities shape politics in a more cumulative approach.

Why diversity?

In the course of serving in political office, public officials address a variety of complex problems that have varying effects on different groups of people. Facing these complex policy environments, political leaders' backgrounds and experiences may help provide information that is necessary to identify a problem, determine criteria for a suitable solution, and select among the alternatives in the policy-making process. A failure to consider salient information or a lack of quality information (or any information at all) prevents the development of effective policy. For example, a leader with a background in education might understand the difficulties of education reform in a different way than would someone without the background. Yet, obtaining information can be costly, given that political leaders have limited time and resources to develop policy expertise.

As individuals vary in expertise and have limited time and resources, backgrounds and experiences can provide more accurate information. Indeed, Pitkin (1967) advocated for diversity in representation, arguing that diverse legislatures are more likely to reflect the plural and assorted viewpoints of constituents. For example, expanding the racial,

gender, or class backgrounds of representatives infuses the policy-making process with new and diverse perspectives (Holman 2015; Mansbridge 2015; Barnes 2012; O'Brien 2018). Collaboration among diverse individuals is also effective for expanding the pool of available information (Barnes 2016).

Representatives from different groups or backgrounds bring information to the policy-making process that would otherwise be absent. Indeed, previous research often concludes that diverse groups make better decisions than homogeneous groups (Page 2008). Legislative diversity is particularly important when legislatures address issues that have not previously been part of the legislative agenda and issues effecting groups whose identities cut across partisan, class, and social cleavages (Phillips 1998; Mansbridge 1999; Dovi 2002; Brown 2014; Holman 2015). Moreover, evidence from Latin America and elsewhere indicates legislators with different backgrounds – be it race, ethnicity, class, or gender – are more likely to sympathize with constituents from shared backgrounds and prioritize their policy needs (Gay 2002; Schwindt-Bayer 2006; Bejarano 2013; Clayton, O'Brien, and Piscopo 2018).

In addition to having important consequences for the policy-making process, diversity among elected representatives is important for fostering democratic legitimacy (Mansbridge 2003) and strengthening representation linkages with society (Morgan 2011). Indeed, when groups of people are continually excluded from decision-making bodies, citizens are less likely to believe that the government represents their best interests and identifies with their concerns (Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005; Childs 2008). By contrast, more inclusive political institutions – that incorporate all citizens' voices into the policy-making process (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2012) – may engender support for the democratic system more broadly, as they more closely reflect the democratic idea.

Given the importance of legislative diversity for the policy-making process and for democratic legitimacy more generally, it is critical to consider how we measure diversity. In this article, we turn our attention to a cross-cutting measure of diversity, focused on evaluating how much a particular political body is diverse, vis-à-vis itself at other points in time and other bodies.

Measuring diversity

We examine the professional and personal backgrounds of national legislators in Argentina through coding and analysis of the Directorio Legislativo (Franceschet and Piscopo 2014; Carnes and Lupu 2015), which contains information on the prior political and party experience, occupational experience (private and public), number of children, marital status, and education.

We use the data contained in the directory to create a new way of measuring legislative diversity, which borrows from measures of diversity traditional used to evaluate population demographics (Hero and Tolbert 1995; Hero 2000; Palmer and Simon 2010). As conceptualized by Sullivan (1973), the measure produces a probability-of-diversity term, where a single number represents the *proportion of characteristics where a randomly drawn pair of individuals will differ*. This also allows for sub-group comparisons, where the diversity of, say, a committee or a caucus could be evaluated against the body overall or against itself over time. We measure the diversity in each legislative body and committee,

where

$$A_W = 1 - \left(\left(\sum_{k=1}^p Y_k^2 \right) / V \right)$$

Y_k = the proportion of the legislative body or committee falling in a given category within each of the variables V = number of variables p = number of categories within all of the variables.

Overall, higher values indicate more diversity, while lower values indicate less diversity. We create a measure of professional diversity to start that incorporates three simple – yet important – measures of the pathways to political office: whether legislators listed (1) a previous public position, (2) a previous private career position, or (3) a previous position in a party organization. For example, if a legislator indicates they previously worked in the municipal government, they are coded as having a public background. By contrast, if a legislator indicates they worked in finance, they are coded as having a private background. The categories are not coded as mutually exclusive, that is, legislators can report having none, some, or all of these experiences. Our approach allows us to examine these factors in culmination.

This data is then aggregated to the chamber-year level, so that each chamber-year in our dataset has a percentage of legislators who have held public (or not), private (or not), and party (or not) positions. The sum of squares of those measures is taken, divided by three and subtracted from one. We focus on these measures because they represent the traditional markers of political experience and policy-making perspectives (Schwindt-Bayer 2011; Franceschet and Piscopo 2014; Carnes and Lupu 2015).

An application: the Argentinian National Congress

Table 1 presents the mean, minimum, maximum, and standard deviation of the *professional diversity index* for all legislators, as well as the measure by each gender. We present the data for each gender to demonstrate that this measure can be used to evaluate both inter-chamber differences as well as intra-chamber differences. These values can be interpreted as a probability; for example, the overall professional diversity index value of 0.486 means that there is a 48.6% chance that if we drew two legislators randomly from all the legislators, they would have different background characteristics. Women's higher level on the index (0.493) means that there is a higher probability that two women will have different professional backgrounds when drawn randomly, as compared to two men (0.472).

We argue that this approach to constructing an index is more flexible and useful in a variety of measurement and investigative circumstances because it accounts for how

Table 1. Professional diversity index 2000–2014.

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Professional diversity index	0.486	0.103	0.322	0.599
Women's professional diversity	0.493	0.095	0.354	0.602
Men's professional diversity	0.472	0.116	0.279	0.606

Note: Professional diversity includes data on the share of the Argentinian House and Senate with the previous public, private, and party experience.

multiple characteristics co-vary. For example, if we just look at one component of the diversity index – those who report they have a background in private industry – 53% of the average of chamber has some experience, with 59% of men and 42% of women. Yet, this does not tell the entire story, because we do not know how this experience overlaps with other types of experience. Ideally, we would want to understand the whole of professional experiences, not just a single metric.

We next look at how diversity shifts over time within chambers to further exercise our method of measuring diversity. To do so, we calculate the diversity measure for each chamber-year in our dataset – we present the data for even years because of two-year election cycles, where the body’s composition changes every other year. These are presented in [Figure 1](#). As is clear in the figure, with the exception of 2004, the House is more diverse in each year than is the Senate, which is consistent with a view that more elite institutions will be less diverse. It is not just the overall gap that is worthy of attention, however, but that the gap between the two bodies – and the overall level of diversity – shifts considerably from year to year. For example, in 2006, the House had an estimated diversity of 0.615, while the Senate’s diversity was 0.517. Yet, by 2014, the gap between the House (0.616) and the Senate (0.455) had grown substantially. Thus, these results might prompt those studying diversity in these bodies to evaluate why it is that some years produce a more diverse group than other years.

There’s also the need to evaluate diversity *within* specific groups in a political body. Popular narratives often discuss women as a homogenous group, yet all evidence points to the need to evaluate diversity within groups of women, given that women emerge from very different background and have substantially difference lived experiences (Barnes and Cassese 2017). As a result, women – like men – have diverse preferences over a range of policies and simply having more women in office does not guarantee more diverse perspectives will be brought to bear on the policy-making process. As such, it is a worthy task to consider how diversity might shift within gender groups in

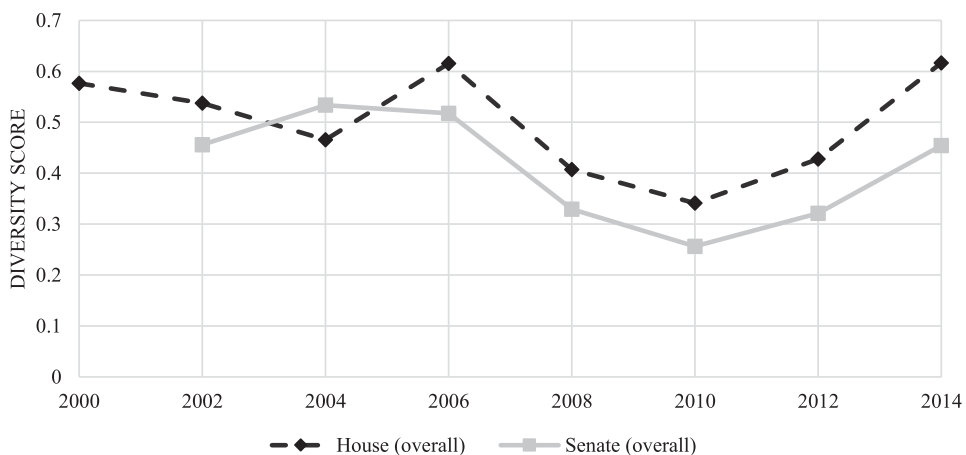


Figure 1. Professional diversity in Argentinian House and Senate by year.

Note: Professional diversity includes data on the share of the body with the previous public, private, and party experience. Data from 2000 is only available for the House.

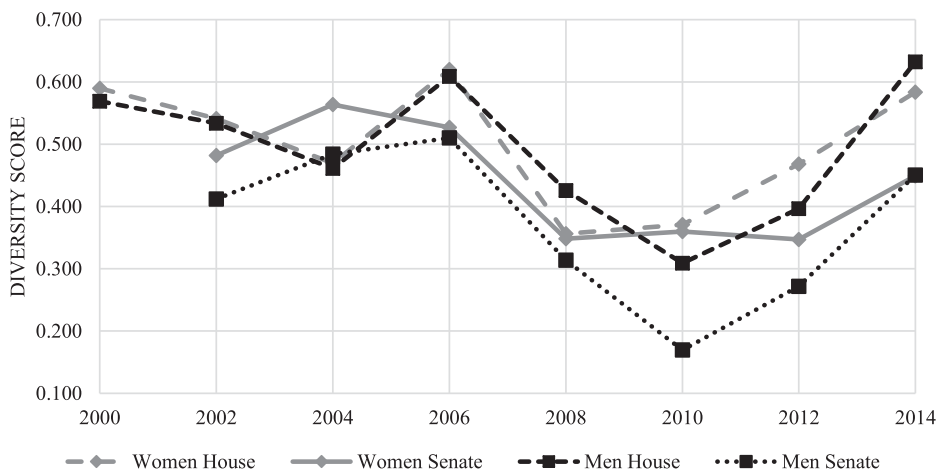


Figure 2. Men's and women's professional diversity by chamber and year.

Note: Professional diversity includes data on the share of the body with the previous public, private, and party experience. Gender has been determined by the authors. Data from 2000 is only available for the House.

the legislature. Overall levels of women's and men's diversity are reported in [Table 1](#), while [Figure 2](#) presents these data over time.

Overall, the average level of diversity for women is higher than for men, but trends over time reveal substantial time-based variance. Generally, women in the house are more diverse in most time periods, although men in the house are more diverse in 2008 and 2014, while women in the Senate are more diverse in 2004. Men in the Senate have an overall lower level of diversity and are the least diverse in every time period except for 2004 when they are more diverse than men and women in the House and 2014 when they are more diverse than men in the house. The gap between the most and least

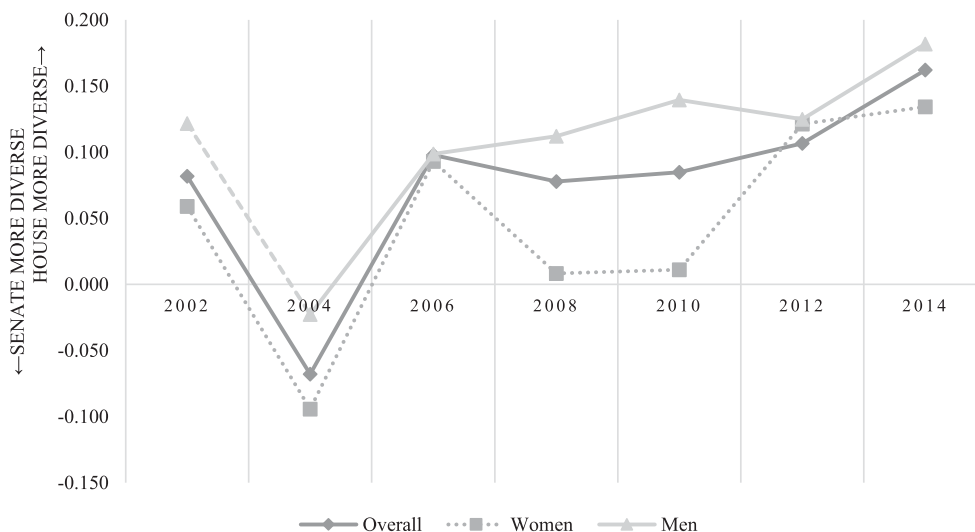


Figure 3. Difference between House and Senate Professional Diversity by year and gender.

Note: Professional diversity includes data on the share of the body with the previous public, private, and party experience.

diverse groups also varies a lot, from clustered in 2004 and 2006 to spread out in 2010, 2012 and 2014.

Figure 3 presents the difference in diversity between House and Senate members overall, for women, and for men. There is a great deal of variation in how much more the House is professionally diversity than the Senate. Interestingly, women in the House look more similar professionally to women in the Senate than do men in the House vs. the Senate. This suggests that whereas women have a similar level of diversity in their backgrounds – whether in the more prestigious Senate or less prestigious House – men in the Senate may come from a more standard elite set of professional experiences when compared to men in the House.

A second application: diversity on committees

We next use our measure of legislative diversity to consider how the professional diversity of men and women vary across different legislative committees in the Argentine House. Although it is important to think about the extent to which the legislative chamber represents a diverse array of representatives, it is also important to consider whether and the extent to which this diversity is represented in various decision-making bodies within the legislature. If committees are comprised of legislators with similar backgrounds than it suggests the diverse experiences that legislators bring to the chamber are not being represented in important stages of the policy-making process. In particular, we know that committees vary dramatically with respect to the prestige, power, and policy jurisdiction, with some legislative committees controlling a disproportionate share of legislative resources (Barnes, 2016; Schwindt-Bayer 2010).

In Argentina, for example, the budget committee controls the disbursement of funds and the general legislation committee acts as a clearinghouse for a wide range of legislation – typically hearing the most important policy issues that pass through the chamber. Other committees have comparably less power. For example, despite that healthcare and education are extremely important policy areas – particularly in developing countries – committee members have limited power and influence over such legislation because they must depend on the budget committee to allocate funding for policies and often times requiring final approval from the general legislation committee. In addition to their varying levels of power and prestige committees also vary dramatically in the policy jurisdiction with some committees focusing on more stereotypically feminine policy areas (such as education, housing, women, children and family issues, or healthcare) and others focusing on traditionally masculine policy domains (such as defense or agriculture).

Previous research has shown that women and minorities tend to be marginalized in the committee appointment process, as they do not gain access to the most influential committees (Duerst-Lahti 2002; Childs 2004; Kanthak and Krause 2010). If these committee assignments disproportionately go to a small handful of legislators, it is also likely that the most powerful committees are the most homogenous and reflect less professional diversity. Further, research indicates that gender stereotypes may influence the committee assignment process with women gaining access to traditionally feminine committees and men gaining access to traditionally masculine committees. To the extent that women and men bring different career backgrounds to the legislature, this may limit the professional diversity represented on committees.

To evaluate variation in the professional diversity on legislative committees we recalculate the professional diversity index across a range of six different legislative committees. We choose two that are known to be the most powerful committees in the Argentine Congress (Budget and General Legislation), two committees that handle traditionally feminine issues (Education and Women, Children and Family) and two committees that handle traditionally masculine issues (Agriculture and Defense). Given that we find that the House is more diverse professionally than the Senate, we examine only committees in the House as a stricter-test scenario.

Table 2 shows the average level of diversity for each committee averaged from 2000 to 2014. The level of diversity varies from a low of 0.445 on the General legislation committee to a high of 0.479 on the agriculture committee. There is very little variation in the level of diversity across committees. The level of diversity in powerful committees is very similar to the level of diversity in feminine committees and masculine committees. Further, there is no discernable pattern in the level of diversity between committee types. We do not, therefore, find evidence to suggest that the most prestigious and powerful committees have less diversity. This lack of variation in diversity between prestigious committees and stereotypically masculine committees may lead scholars to consider when the committee are likely to have a more diverse delegation. For example, although we measure professional diversity as a product of private, public, and party experience, future research using our method may consider whether diversity varies within committees when accounting for whether legislators have backgrounds performing the stereotypical feminine or masculine jobs.

Despite that we observe very little variation across different types of committees, there is substantial variation in committee diversity over time. On average, this pattern appears to be driven by chamber-wide diversity rather than varying systematically by committee type. That said, it is evident from the standard deviation that some committees have more variation in the level of diversity from year to year than others. For example, although the General Legislation Committee has the lowest level of diversity, it (along with the Women, Children and Family committee) has the highest standard deviation, indicating a substantial variation from year to year. By contrast, the standard deviation in the level of variation for the Education and Agriculture Committees is less than half the size of the standard deviation observed for the General Legislation Committee indicating that the overall diversity in these committees is more stable over time.¹

To better understand how the professional diversity varies in each committee overtime, we plotted the level of professional diversity (on the y -axis) from 2000 to 2014 (on the x -axis) for three committees (i.e., Budget, Women, Family, and Children, and Defense).

Table 2. Professional diversity index by the committee in House.

	Overall mean	Standard deviation
Budget	0.466	0.104
General Legislation	0.445	0.123
Education	0.467	0.090
Women, Children and Family	0.470	0.142
Defense	0.457	0.125
Agriculture	0.479	0.082

Note: Higher values indicate more diverse populations, lower values indicate less diversity. Measure is the probability that two individuals selected at random will have the same background.

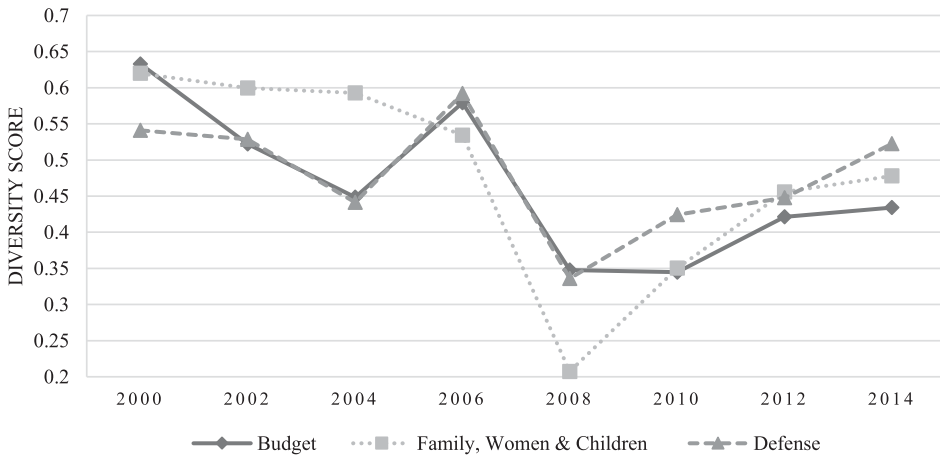


Figure 4. Diversity in Committees by year.

Note: Higher values indicate more diverse populations, lower values indicate less diversity. Measure is the probability that two individuals selected at random will have the same background.

Overall, [Figure 4](#) demonstrates that the three committees display similar trends over time. The level of diversity appears to be quite high in 2000, dipping slightly in 2002 and 2004, and peaking again in 2006. In 2008 and 2010, however, the level of diversity declines substantially in all committees. Although diversity begins to increase in 2012 and 2014 it does not recover to the high levels of early 2000. Despite these similarities, some important differences remain.

The dark line marked by diamonds plots diversity in the Budget committee over time. In 2000 the Budget Committee is the most diverse committee. In contrast, the Family, Women, and Children Committee (marked by light gray squares) is the most diverse in 2002 and 2004, but the least diverse committee in 2008. Finally, in the early 2000s, the Defense Committee shows a high level of diversity but declines after 2006, before increasing to have the highest level of diversity in 2010 and 2014.

Conclusion

There is a growing interest in understanding parity in political representation. Diversity in decision-making bodies is important for representing the plural preferences of the constituents and for developing the best most effective policy solutions. Up until this point, most research has considered how legislatures vary along one or two dimensions and has done so by considering the percentage of legislators in a chamber that hold different descriptive characteristics (e.g., gender, race, or class).

We argue that it is important to consider the various aspects of diversity in an institution – rather than focusing on one or two specific dimensions (as compared to [Fraser 2007](#), for example). By evaluating legislative diversity through only one dimension we can obscure the diversity that does exist within an institution or even conclude that institutions are more diverse than they actually are. For example, even within relatively racially and ethnically homogenous countries, descriptive representation requires social and class diversity. This may lead to scholars and practitioners

overlooking other types of important variation. Increasing the number of women in office, for example, may improve appearances – signaling that an institution is diverse – but simply adding more women may not be sufficient to improve other aspects of legislative diversity.

Beyond explaining diversity in legislatures, committees, parties, or other political and elite organization, our approach to measuring diversity could have a number of different applications, including in investigations of who runs for political office. Research on recruitment, political ambition, and candidate pools suggests important differences in how Democrats and Republicans in the United States recruit candidates for political office (Crowder-Meyer 2013; Crowder-Meyer and Lauderdale 2014). This approach might also answer questions about why some women might be hesitant to run for office (Preece and Stoddard 2015), as well as how variation in the professionalism of elected bodies limit the access of certain groups. Comparatively, research on women's representation demonstrates the importance of parties and context for shaping women's representation and behavior (Banducci and Karp 2000; Thomas and Bodet 2013; Clayton 2015), as has work on class and representation (Carnes and Lupu 2015). The application of our approach in a comparative context could not only allow for intercountry evaluations, but also intraparty examinations, building on work by Hughes (2013) and others. And, while we focus here on how diversity is measured among elites, our approach could easily be used to construct measures of the voting population, to examine how increases or decreases in the diversity of voters might shape who wins elections.

The measure presented here is far from the only way to measure diversity, nor would it be useful in all circumstances. Studying how a particular group is marginalized from political power points to the utility of identifying a specific characteristic that distinguishes some individuals from others. In this circumstance, it might be useful to consider how that characteristic (gender or race, for example) might interact with a more or less diverse environment, recognizing both the utility of the diversity measure and the importance of a particular characteristic. Our measure is also highly dependent on “binning” individuals into separate categories, even as we know that a measure like gender is not dichotomous (Bittner and Goodyear-Grant 2017). Yet, our measure also offers the ability of an individual to appear in multiple categories at once, which provides an improvement for the political reality of multiracial candidates (Lemi 2017).

One potential use for a more flexible measure of diversity is the ability to use it as a measure of shifting contexts. For example, we know that the number of “quality challengers” might vary by open or closed seats in elections, or by whether there is a woman running (Barnes, Branton, and Cassese 2017). We also know that women's entry is shaped by her view of the probability of winning a seat (Ondercin 2018). Our measure of diversity might provide an opportunity for a more flexible and adaptable measure of the quality of challengers. Such an application might be used across a broad set of circumstances where scholars need measures that shift over time and across location or context. Overall, any approach that provides a greater opportunity to understand how the characteristics of voters or candidates might interact with each other is potentially a methodological and theoretical improvement over the state of the discipline.

Note

1. In Argentina the incumbency rate is only about 20% from year to year and committee assignments are not based on seniority. Thus it is unlikely that variation in the level of diversity on a given committee from year to year is a product of variation in legislative turnover across committees.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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