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## Where Quotas Work

By Swanee Hunt

THE NEW IRAQI constitution — to be approved or rejected in a nationwide referendum today — includes a provision that would never get passed in the United States: It sets aside at least 25% of the seats in parliament for women.

Such an idea would be laughed off the table in American politics. It's undemocratic, right? The theory here — under the system laid out in our own Constitution — is that if our citizens want to elect women, they'll vote for them.

If "set-asides" were suggested, critics would immediately ask why having women in government is more important than having blacks, or Latinos, or Jews. Should we have set-asides for all of them? That would be deemed ridiculous, unworkable and undesirable.

So why is the United States allowing such a system to be installed in Iraq — and even encouraging people to vote for it? For a number of reasons, and I think they're absolutely right.

For one thing, it's not such an unusual idea. We may think our way is the only way. But in fact, quotas are common these days and aren't reserved for new democracies emerging from conflict.

In fact, an astounding 50 countries have quotas for women mandated constitutionally or in their election law, and another 72 have quotas or targets in the rules of their political parties.

The new Afghan constitution, passed in 2004, also includes a 25% set-aside for women in the Wolesi Jirga, the national council. But it's not always the countries you'd expect. In Rwanda, the post-genocide constitution guarantees that women hold at least 30% of the lower house (the elected chamber) through a women-only ballot, and women have also competed with men for seats on the regular ballot. Today

women total 49% of the House of Deputies, the highest in the world.

The sad truth is that the U.S. trails 66 countries in the percentage of women in the legislature's lower (or in some cases, its only) house, including Mozambique, Uzbekistan and Pakistan. All have quotas.

Generally, such measures are designed to compensate for pervasive cultural, economic and religious barriers that would otherwise prevent women from achieving equitable representation. It's no secret, for instance, that in the most rigid Islamic cultures, women are not allowed to leave the house without a male relative, much less campaign for office. Not exactly a level playing field on election day.

In "first past the post" systems such as ours, where individual candidates (rather than political parties) run against each other for a specific office, women have trouble raising the early money that makes their candidacy feasible. In countries with "proportional representation," where voters select a political party, women are often shut out of the room — figuratively and literally — when candidate lists are drawn by party leaders.

The Swedes, who have quotas within their political parties, have a legislature that's 45% women. So perhaps it should be no surprise that Sweden grants paternity leave for fathers and leads the world in combating sex trafficking and prostitution.

Studies by Professor Alice Eagley and researcher Rose McDermott have found that women are generally long on collaboration and short on war mongering. In Cambodia, Congo and Kosovo, women have stepped into post-conflict leadership vacuums to combat corruption, stop rampaging

militias and unite women parliamentarians across party lines.

Gender differences are visible in domestic policy too. According to psychologists Felicia Pratto and Jim Sidanius, women are more supportive than men when it comes to people-oriented policies such as government-sponsored healthcare, guaranteed jobs for all and greater aid to poor children. Also, a study sponsored by the World Bank (by David Dollar, Ramond Fisman and Roberta Gatti) says that governments with more females have lower rates of corruption.

In the U.S., women hold only 14% of the Senate and 15% of the House of Representatives. The news isn't much better in the states, where only eight women serve as governors. Looking again at the lower house (or only house), we're 67th in the world in terms of women's representation.

Political change moves at glacial speed in the U.S. That's why we keep an Electoral College that no longer makes sense. But our nation's in trouble, and we need a new cast on the political stage.

Americans may be allergic to quotas, but there are plenty of other ways to promote women in politics and public service. With all our talk about spreading democracy and fair representation, we'd do well to listen to the experience of the many countries that make sure women have an ample say in their future. They may be onto something.

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