

# The exit TRAP

• LUCAS NOVAES •  
DO FEMALE POLITICIANS BOUNCE BACK?

**Why aren't there more women in politics? There is plenty of evidence about the obstacles encountered by potential candidates, but less is known about the difficulties women face inside the political arena. Studying all municipal elections in Brazil since 2004, IAST researcher Lucas Novaes finds that female politicians are much more likely to drop out after an initial defeat. Preliminary results also suggest that women who win elections are less likely to get married.**

A successful political career – which Benjamin Disraeli compared to climbing a greasy pole – often requires bouncing back from defeat. “If you lose an election, you’re receiving a signal that maybe you’re not cut out for it. Maybe it’s time for Hillary Clinton to retire,” says Lucas. “But losing is also part of the political game for promising candidates.”

Two thirds of Brazilian incumbents have previously lost a vote. But Lucas notes that these defeats were mitigated by gains in experience and political capital: “Candidates carry their networking with voters, donors and elites to the next race. Political setbacks signal where the messaging is muted, whose support is key and where one should focus effort and resources.”

## WOMEN'S STRUGGLE

Despite progress in many advanced economies, the political climb remains far more slippery for women, who constitute only 22% of representatives in national chambers. “There are a lot of distortions in popular representation around the world,” says Lucas, “but the most glaring and consistent is the lack of women in public office. It is well documented that structural, attitudinal, and institutional factors make women less likely to even aspire to run for office. Women participate less and have fewer female role models in politics, face institutional rules that block their entrance, and suffer discrimination from party elites.”

Potential female candidates often have less resources and are shunned from participating in elections by party leaders. “Although voters’ prejudice against women has been largely ruled out as a reason for the gender gap,” says Lucas, “voters still respond differently to men and women politicians, and there is evidence that parties prefer choosing men over women, even when having women is the best electoral strategy.” Most studies on the gender gap focus on these distortions that push women away from ever entering politics, or on the disadvantages women face when running in elections against men. But until now, the trajectories of women after entering politics have not received much attention.

**“There are a lot of distortions in popular representation, but the most glaring and consistent is the lack of women”**

## FAILED QUOTAS

Efforts to narrow the gender gap with quotas have had little success in Brazil. Starting in 2012, at least 30% of open lists for proportional elections had to be female candidates. However, in 2016 less than 14% of councilors, which are elected in an open-list PR system, were women. In the Federal Congress, only 9% of legislators were female. The list requirement did not generate any spillover



effect to offices that do not require quotas. Among mayors, a more influential politician and a natural progression for successful councilors, just 11% were women. Last year, only one of the 26 state capitals had a female mayor.

The lack of substantive change after the quota implementation indicates that increasing supply and demand for women to participate in politics may not be enough, says Lucas. “The same reasons preventing women from entering the candidates’ pool may still affect them after they join the political arena. Several countries have established quotas to bridge the gender gap, but having more female candidates may do nothing to counter cemented structural factors that keep women out.”

## PERSEVERANCE GAP

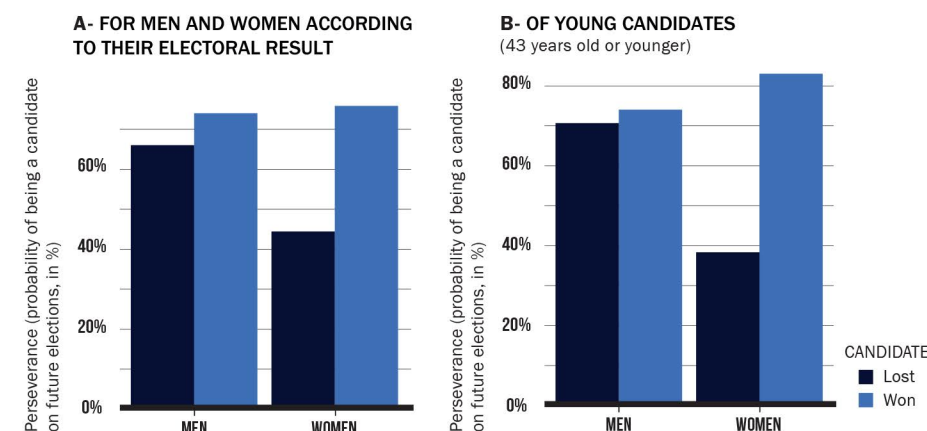
In a working paper entitled ‘The Exit Trap’, Lucas tests for a perseverance gap. His research analyzes if, when most demand factors that prevent women from entering

politics are absent, female politicians exit politics more often than men. Brazilian municipal elections provide a suitable testing field, as it is a fully democratic country, with quotas and an electoral system that makes nominations of competitive female candidates unlikely to be blocked by party elites. Mandatory disclosure of campaign contributions also allows direct examination of candidates’ resources.

**“Having more female candidates may do nothing to counter structural factors that keep women out”**

An important feature of Lucas’s analysis is the inclusion of elections where at least one man and one woman won, and one man and one woman lost the election, and where candidates have won or lost the election by 10 votes or less. This design ensures that candidates face the same competitors, voter preferences, political environment and elite dispositions at the time of the election. Candidates from both genders also face the same potential future competitors and voters. And, since elections are decided by a

## THE EFFECTS OF INCUMBENCY ON PERSEVERANCE:



“If you lose an election, you’re receiving a signal that maybe you’re not cut out for it. Maybe it’s time for Hillary Clinton to retire,” says IAST’s Lucas Novaes. “But losing is also part of the political game for promising candidates”

very narrow margin, incumbency is assigned to candidates as if by a coin toss, which makes winners and losers of the same gender comparable.

Lucas’s results show that winning female candidates and all men have similar perseverance rates, but losing women are much less likely to run for elections again: “Looking at the losing women, we see a huge gap, only around 47% decide to run again. My research design and additional tests show that education, experience, resources and discrimination from elites cannot explain the deficit. Winning an election determines women’s perseverance, while for men it doesn’t really matter. This gap

is even greater among young candidates, so in Brazil it doesn’t look like this problem is going away soon.”

## OPPORTUNITY COSTS

What can account for this perseverance gap? Analyzing the marital status of candidates after elections, Lucas finds that women who win elections get married less often. “I had to do a lot of social-media ‘stalking’ to get these preliminary results. Something is going on in the household: women face a trade-off in terms of family achievement if they want to be successful in their political careers; for men, there’s no effect. Without the compensation of being elected, the opportunity costs of remaining active in politics might be too high for some women.”

Lucas is planning to expand his research, looking more carefully at the influence of domestic life on female politicians: “The evidence so far suggests that the structural factors that keep potential female candidates out of politics are still at play even after women have entered.”

## FIND OUT MORE

To read Lucas’s work on political representation and clientelism in the developing world, visit [www.lucasmnovaes.com](http://www.lucasmnovaes.com)