

RESEARCH NOTE

Voting for gender balancing? The effect of a multiple-vote system on women's representation

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Abstract

Does permitting voters to select multiple candidates in majoritarian elections increase diversity among those elected? While majoritarian systems typically use single-vote ballots, research suggests that allowing multiple selections may increase the representation of women and racial minorities. However, empirical evidence regarding actual voter behavior remains limited. To address this gap, we conducted a survey experiment that varied the number of selectable candidates from one to three in multimember local elections. The results revealed that, under the multiple-vote condition, respondents were more likely to alternate by gender, particularly in their second- and third-ranked choices, supporting the theory that multiple voting fosters more diverse representation. Nevertheless, men often emerged as the first-ranked choice, giving them an overall advantage at the aggregate level.

Keywords: electoral systems; gender; survey experiment; voting behavior

1. Introduction

Research has extensively documented how proportional representation (PR) and gender quotas affect women's representation. However, institutional variations within majoritarian electoral systems and their implications for representational diversity remain largely understudied.¹ Although commonly linked to single-member districts and single-vote ballots, many majoritarian elections employ multimember districts that allow voters to cast multiple votes. Prior research suggests that majoritarian rules permitting multiple candidate preferences—such as ranked-choice, cumulative, or limited voting—may correlate with more diverse candidate slates and outcomes. Nonetheless, findings remain mixed and context-dependent (Brockington *et al.*, 1998; John *et al.*, 2018; Santucci and Scott, 2021; Casella *et al.*, 2023; Crowder-Meyer *et al.*, 2024), and empirical evidence linking these institutional features to more diverse outcomes remains limited. This gap motivates our central question: how does ballot structure shape voting behavior and ultimately affect the diversity of elected officials?

We compare two electoral systems: the Block Vote (BV), where voters can cast as many votes as there are seats and distribute them across candidates, and the Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV),

¹PR systems are often seen as more favorable to women's election compared to majoritarian systems (Krook, 2018; Profeta and Woodhouse, 2022), particularly under closed-list rules (Dhima *et al.*, 2021; Gonzalez-Eiras and Sanz, 2021; but see Golder *et al.*, 2017).

where each voter casts only one vote.² While both systems are multimember plurality rules that allocate seats to the top n vote-getters in multimember districts, they differ in ballot structure. This institutional variation allows us to assess how ballot structure affects voters' propensity to support underrepresented candidates. To evaluate this question, we conducted a preregistered conjoint experiment with 5,400 Japanese voters, simulating candidate selection in local elections—a context characterized by weak partisan cues and limited nomination control. Respondents were randomly assigned to cast either one vote (SNTV) or three votes (BV) from a hypothetical set of candidates differing in gender, age, and education, with BV votes cast sequentially and counted according to BV rules.

The results indicate that under the BV system, voters are more likely to alternate candidate genders in their second- and third-ranked choices, suggesting that multi-vote ballots may promote more gender-balanced voting. However, this pattern did not extend to other attributes, such as age or education. While support for female candidates increased in later rounds, women were overall less likely to be elected under BV due to the predominance of male candidates in first-ranked choices. By examining institutional variation within majoritarian systems, this study demonstrates that ballot structure—specifically, the number of votes allotted per voter—significantly influences voter behavior and support for underrepresented candidates. These findings reveal the trade-offs associated with modest reforms and suggest that ballot design, alongside PR reforms, can meaningfully influence representational outcomes.

2. Voting for gender balancing

While voters often base their choices on policy preferences, policy outcomes are also shaped by institutional bargaining among governing actors. Anticipating these dynamics, voters may engage in *policy balancing* by splitting their tickets across parties or institutions to influence the composition of governing bodies (Alesina and Rosenthal, 1995; Fiorina, 1996; Lacy and Paolino, 1998; Mebane, 2000; Mebane and Sekhon, 2002; Kedar, 2006). We extend this logic to *representational balancing*, wherein voters aim to diversify elected bodies along gender lines, reflecting a concern for descriptive representation beyond mere policy outcomes. This behavior is particularly relevant in multimember plurality systems, such as BV and SNTV, where party labels are relatively weak, and candidates must compete both across and within parties.³ These systems encourage candidate-centered campaigns, elevating the salience of personal attributes such as gender. This tendency is rooted in institutional incentives to cultivate a personal vote (Carey and Shugart, 1995) and is further reinforced by gender heuristics and equality norms. Although voters may differentiate candidates based on various characteristics, such as age, education, or occupation, we focus on gender as a salient and widely recognized heuristic.⁴

We identify three theoretical mechanisms that drive gender balancing among voters. First, from the perspective of *substantive representation*, male and female politicians often prioritize different policy areas (Schaffner, 2005; Atkinson and Windett 2019; Ono and Miwa, 2023); research indicates that women are more likely to advocate for issues such as welfare, education, and gender equality. Second, in low-information contexts, gender serves as a salient cue that voters use to infer candidates' values and priorities (McDermott, 1997; Badas and Stauffer, 2019; Ono and Burden, 2019).

²The BV system is currently employed in the Philippine and Spanish Senates, the Gibraltar Parliament, and various sub-national elections in Canada, Switzerland, the USA, and the UK. SNTV was formerly implemented in national elections in Afghanistan, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.

³In Japan, the SNTV system often lacked effective coordination, as major parties struggled to manage nominations, leading to factions running multiple candidates and generating intense intra-party competition (Reed, 1994; Cox, 1997; Scheiner, 2005).

⁴Carey and Shugart (1995, 435, fn. 14) cite journalistic accounts of Jordan's 1993 BV election, where voters used cues such as clan affiliation and ideology for each of their three votes, illustrating how cue-based differentiation operates in multi-vote systems.

Third, beyond instrumental policy considerations, normative concerns such as fairness, equity, and democratic inclusion may motivate voters to favor gender-balanced outcomes to enhance democratic legitimacy and representativeness.

These motivations yield distinct implications across electoral systems. In the SNTV system, where voters cast only one vote in multimember districts, vote balancing is limited. Voters with gender biases may disproportionately favor male candidates, especially in the absence of party labels, resulting in male-dominated outcomes. In contrast, the BV system allows voters to cast multiple votes, enabling them to balance their preferences by alternating between genders—an observable and politically significant behavior.

H1: Under the BV system, voters are more likely to alternate between male and female candidates as they make their choices than consistently choosing candidates of the same gender.

Our second hypothesis examines how the number of votes allotted to each voter influences outcomes in multimember electoral systems. In the SNTV system, voters cast a single vote, whereas in the BV system, voters can cast multiple votes. If voters act sincerely, their first choice under BV should correspond to their choice under SNTV. If H1 holds true, the two systems are expected to yield different outcomes, particularly regarding the gender composition of elected candidates, due to the balancing effect under BV. Specifically, we expect that the gender gap in voter support will be smaller under BV, where gender balancing is more achievable.

H2: The difference in voter support between male and female candidates is smaller under the BV system than under the SNTV system.

3. Research design

We conducted a preregistered survey incorporating a conjoint experiment to test our hypotheses.⁵ Conjoint designs enable the simultaneous manipulation of multiple candidate attributes, allowing us to estimate each attribute's effect on vote choice. The survey was administered from 19 to 23 February 2022, targeting Japanese residents aged 18–69 years enrolled in panels affiliated with Lucid Marketplace. To approximate the national population, we recruited respondents using quotas based on gender, age, education, and region of residence. The final sample comprised 5,400 respondents who passed attention checks.⁶ The survey began by collecting demographic data and measuring levels of sexism, followed by a candidate-choice conjoint experiment. In this module, respondents completed five tasks; in each task, they viewed six profiles of hypothetical municipal assembly candidates and, depending on the assigned condition, selected either one or three candidates they would vote for (see Supplementary Appendix A for question wording).⁷

Candidate profiles were defined by attributes typically available to voters during elections, including gender (man or woman), age, education, occupation, hometown, and legislative experience. Party affiliation was omitted to reflect the candidate-centered nature of Japanese local elections, where partisan labels are often muted, and many candidates run as independents.⁸ Each profile also

⁵ Our preanalysis plan is available on AsPredicted (https://aspredicted.org/W8C_J4I). A complementary hypothesis to H1, as outlined in the plan, is presented in Supplementary Appendix D.1. The survey received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Law, Keio University.

⁶ Respondents who failed attention checks were excluded before the main survey, which prevents robustness checks for this group. However, since this exclusion occurred pretreatment, it does not introduce post-treatment bias.

⁷ We focused on municipal assemblies that continue to use the SNTV, thereby enhancing the experiment's realism. SNTV is also employed in some prefectural districts for Japan's upper-house elections.

⁸ In the 2019 local elections, 68% of municipal assembly candidates ran as independents, and over half of the party-affiliated candidates were associated with two non-major parties (Somusho Jichi Gyosei Kyoku Senkyo Bu, 2021). Moreover, research



Figure 1. Screenshot of candidate profiles in the conjoint experiment.
Note: In each task, respondents selected one candidate under SNTV and three under BV.

featured a pictogram depicting either a male or female face (see Figure 1).⁹ Attribute levels were selected to approximate the marginal distributions observed among actual local assembly members in Japan, thereby enhancing external validity (de la Cuesta *et al.*, 2022). The sole exception was gender, which was assigned uniformly at random. Full details on the attribute wording, level definitions, and data sources for the real-world profile distribution are available in Supplementary Appendix B.

The core feature of our experiment is the random assignment of respondents to one of the two conditions. In the SNTV condition, respondents selected a *single* candidate from a list of six; in the BV condition, they selected *three* candidates in ranked order.¹⁰ All respondents were informed that the district magnitude was three, simulating an SNTV election for one group and a BV election for the other. Respondents were randomly assigned in a 1:3 ratio, resulting in 1,456 individuals in the SNTV group and 3,944 in the BV group.¹¹ As in other candidate-choice conjoint studies, the unit of analysis is each candidate per task.¹² Each respondent completed five tasks, each featuring six candidates, yielding a total of 162,000 observations. To test H1, we restricted the data to the BV group,

indicates that candidates in Japanese local elections may strategically avoid partisan labels while still maintaining ties to national parties (Hijino, 2013).

⁹The pictograms licensed from Adobe Stock were employed to help ensure that respondents could easily recognize candidate gender, which is crucial since conjoint respondents often overlook attributes (Jenke *et al.*, 2021). While this may raise concerns about experimenter demand effects, gender is typically apparent in real elections through names and campaign materials. Recent studies suggest that such effects are minimal, even when researchers' intentions are known (de Quidt *et al.*, 2018; Mummolo and Peterson, 2019).

¹⁰Although the BV system does not use ordinal ballots in practice, we asked respondents to sequentially select three candidates and then mapped these choices to votes according to the BV rule to test H1.

¹¹We assigned more respondents to the BV group, as it was used to test multiple hypotheses, whereas the SNTV group was only required for H2.

¹²We confirmed the robustness of our findings through choice-level analysis, which accounts for potential dependencies among candidates within tasks. Results are reported in Supplementary Appendix E.2, including a comparison that shows

regressing indicators for whether a candidate was ranked second or third on the candidate's gender, the respondents' choice for the previous rank, and their interaction, while excluding higher-ranked candidates.¹³ For H2, we pooled the two groups to assess how the effect of being female on vote choice varies between electoral systems. Standard errors were clustered by respondent, and statistical significance was evaluated at the 5% level. Details of the models and variables are provided in Supplementary Appendix C.

In accordance with our preregistered plan, we examined not only the full sample but also the two key subgroups: male respondents and individuals with high levels of hostile sexism. We included the latter group because previous research indicates that hostile sexism predicts attitudes toward female candidates (Bauer, 2015). Hostile sexism was measured using a five-item scale from Schaffner (2022), with responses summed and scores above the median classified as high. These analyses aim to examine whether individuals who are less supportive of gender equality still engage in gender balancing under the BV system. We anticipate that both groups will demonstrate lower support for female candidates. For example, male respondents may prefer male candidates due to gender affinity (Badas and Stauffer, 2019).

4. Results

We begin with the results for H1. The top panel of Figure 2 presents the average marginal component effects (AMCEs) of being a female candidate on the likelihood of selection as the second-ranked choice in the BV group, conditional on the gender of the first-ranked candidate. The bottom panel shows the AMCEs for third-ranked choices, conditional on the second-ranked selection. Positive values indicate a greater likelihood of selection for female candidates.

The figure reveals that the AMCE for second-ranked choices remains consistent regardless of the prior selection. However, gender balancing becomes apparent for third-ranked choices: respondents who selected a male candidate second were 1.6 percentage points more likely to choose a female third, whereas those who selected a female candidate second were 1.3 percentage points less likely to choose another woman. These results provide partial support for H1, particularly concerning the third-choice level.

Table 1 contextualizes these findings by reporting the full-gender sequences chosen in the BV group. Across all combinations of first and second choices, mixed-gender combinations at the second and third ranks occurred more frequently than same-gender sequences. For instance, man–man–woman appeared 2.3 percentage points more often than man–man–man; similarly, woman–man–woman was 1.1 percentage points more frequent than woman–man–man. These patterns indicate a behavioral tendency toward gender diversification in later selections.

Figure 3 presents the AMCEs of candidate gender across the SNTV and BV groups.¹⁴ In the SNTV system, female candidates had a marginal, statistically insignificant advantage of 0.5 percentage points. In contrast, under the BV system, they were significantly less likely to be selected, facing a disadvantage of 0.9 percentage points. Contrary to H2, the overall gender gap widened under BV.

The pattern of gender balancing persisted in subgroup analyses (see Supplementary Appendices D.4 and D.5). Male respondents and individuals scoring above the median on hostile sexism generally favored male candidates, particularly in the BV condition. Nevertheless, consistent with H1,

the probability of choosing a female candidate is significantly lower under BV than under SNTV for the first-ranked choice (Supplementary Table A.5).

¹³Excluding higher-ranked candidates introduced dependencies in the attribute distributions. While weighting is ideal for achieving accurate estimation, specifying respondent-specific weights proved impractical. To mitigate potential biases—particularly regarding gender and quality-related attributes—we conducted robustness checks alongside our hypothesis tests.

¹⁴Estimates for other attributes' AMCE are provided in Supplementary Appendix D.3.

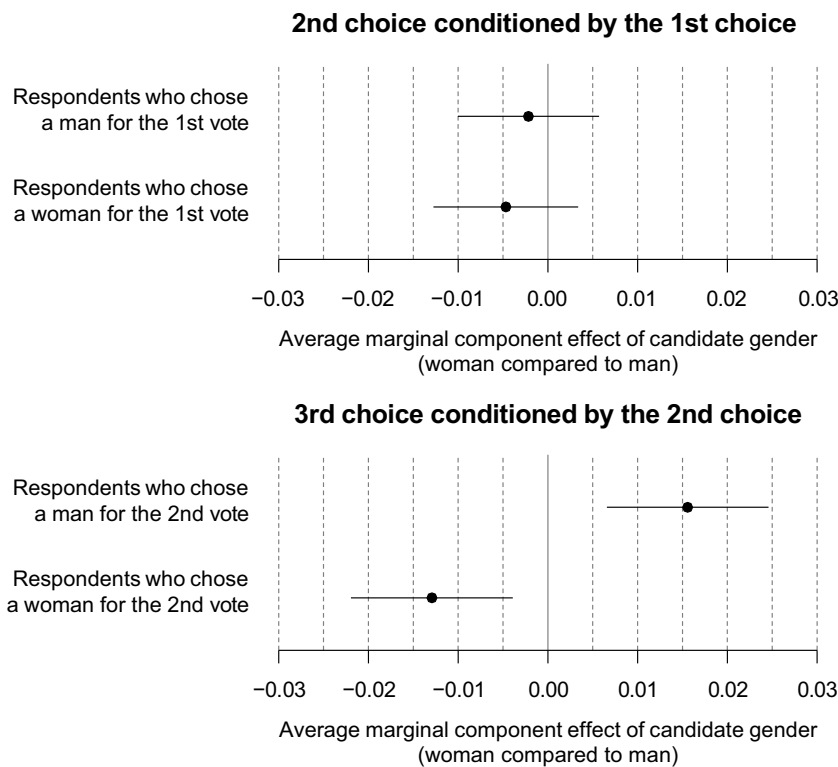


Figure 2. AMCE of candidate gender in second- and third-rank choices in the BV group, based on the gender of the candidate selected in the previous rank.
Note: Dots indicate point estimates of the AMCEs for candidate gender (man vs. woman); lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

Table 1. Pattern in the gender order of candidates chosen by the BV respondents

Candidate gender			Prob. (%)
1st	2nd	3rd	
Man	Man	Man	11.6
Man	Man	Woman	13.9
Man	Woman	Man	13.9
Man	Woman	Woman	12.8
Woman	Man	Man	11.6
Woman	Man	Woman	12.7
Woman	Woman	Man	12.1
Woman	Woman	Woman	11.5

these groups demonstrated a greater willingness to select a candidate of the opposite gender as their third-ranked choice than as their second-ranked choice. Even among voters with strong anti-female attitudes, the probability of including a woman increased when their second-ranked choice was a man.

Some may question whether the differences in the effect of candidate gender across the SNTV and BV conditions—or among ranked choices in BV—partly reflect variations in *candidate selectability*. In the SNTV condition, a respondent who prefers men can typically select a male candidate unless all six candidates are women (a scenario with a probability of 0.016). In contrast, in the BV condition, if fewer than three of the six candidates are male (a scenario occurring with a probability of 0.344), respondents may be compelled to select at least one woman. Similarly, while respondents in the BV

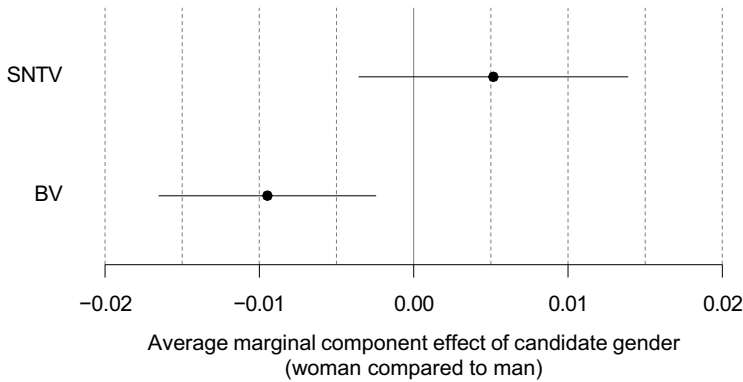


Figure 3. AMCE for candidate gender depending on electoral systems.

Note: Dots indicate point estimates of the AMCEs for candidate gender (female vs. male); lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

condition can freely rank a male candidate first, limited male availability may compel them to select women in lower ranks. To address these concerns, we conducted several robustness checks: for H1, we controlled for the number of remaining female candidates; for H2, we restricted observations in the BV group to tasks with equal numbers of male and female profiles. The results of these checks and additional analyses (see Supplementary Appendix E.1) indicate that our findings are not artifacts of these structural constraints.

In summary, the conjoint experiment reveals that, under the BV system, respondents were more likely to alternate genders in their second- and third-ranked choices, thereby supporting H1. However, because first-ranked choices strongly favored male candidates, women were ultimately less likely to be selected under BV than under SNTV, contradicting H2. These findings suggest that while multi-vote ballots can promote gender balancing at lower ranks, the dynamics of first-choice selections still tend to favor male candidates.

5. Conclusion

While extensive research has examined the effects of PR and gender quotas on women's legislative representation, less attention has been paid to how majoritarian systems—particularly those permitting multiple votes—influence gendered voting behavior. Although previous studies suggest that multi-vote settings may encourage voters to diversify their choices, robust empirical evidence remains limited. To address this gap, we conducted a preregistered survey experiment comparing two majoritarian systems used in multimember districts: BV (multiple votes) and SNTV (single vote). We hypothesized that BV would promote “gender balancing” behavior, especially in candidate-centered local elections. In the conjoint experiment, respondents were randomly assigned to either the SNTV or BV condition. As expected, those in the BV condition were more likely to alternate genders in their second- and third-ranked choices, although our design does not identify the underlying mechanism. This pattern persisted even among male respondents and individuals with high levels of hostile sexism, who generally exhibit lower support for female candidates. Robustness checks eliminated mechanical constraints as a cause of this behavior. In contrast, no corresponding gender balancing was observed between the first- and second-ranked selections. Future research should investigate why balancing emerges later in the selection sequence rather than during the initial step.

Contrary to our hypothesis, female candidates were less likely to be selected under the BV system than under SNTV overall. The predominance of men in first-choice votes under BV offset the gender balancing observed in lower rankings, despite neither system weighting selections by rank.

This finding suggests that multi-vote structures may encourage diversification in subsequent selections while amplifying gender bias in the initial choice, potentially reflecting a tendency for the first choice to favor male candidates. This result contrasts with the meta-analysis by Schwarz and Coppock (2022) showing broad support for female candidates, which may partly reflect assumptions based on single-vote contexts. The balancing effect appears specific to gender, as no comparable patterns were observed for age, education, hometown, or legislative experience (see Supplementary Appendix F). This raises important questions regarding how sequence position interacts with the perceived importance of each vote.

Finally, our study highlights the understudied influence of electoral design on women's representation within majoritarian systems. Although our conjoint design excluded party labels and did not account for strategic voting (see Cox, 1997), the findings provide compelling evidence that ballot structure affects gendered voting behavior. Future research should investigate how candidate gender interacts with party cues, party nominations, and strategic behavior under majoritarian rules. It is important to recognize that, in partisan environments, BV can result in *de facto* winner-take-all outcomes within districts; in such scenarios, party nominations may have a greater impact on electoral outcomes than voters' gender preferences (see Matland, 1993). Hence, the insights from our candidate-centered setting should not be overgeneralized to partisan elections. Nevertheless, some implications may extend to the limited vote system—another multimember rule that often yields more proportional outcomes than BV—even in partisan contexts, as the same gender-balancing mechanism could operate when party coordination is weak. Further research is needed to examine these dynamics under partisan conditions. Overall, these findings underscore the inherent trade-offs in majoritarian systems and demonstrate how ballot structure shapes gendered voting behavior beyond what has been documented under PR.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2026.10108>.

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Data availability statement. Replication files are available on the PSRM Dataverse at: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7927/H73T-6K9M>.

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Competing interests. The authors declare no competing interests.

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