

# WOMEN, REPRESENTATION, AND ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

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## ABSTRACT

This project assesses the gendered implications of first-past-the-post (FPTP), alternative voting, proportional representation (PR), and mixed-member representation (MMP). Substantive representation of women (the representation of women's interests on the political agenda) is conceptualized as the actualization of feminist political goals, one of which is the descriptive representation of women in parliament (the number of women elected to office).

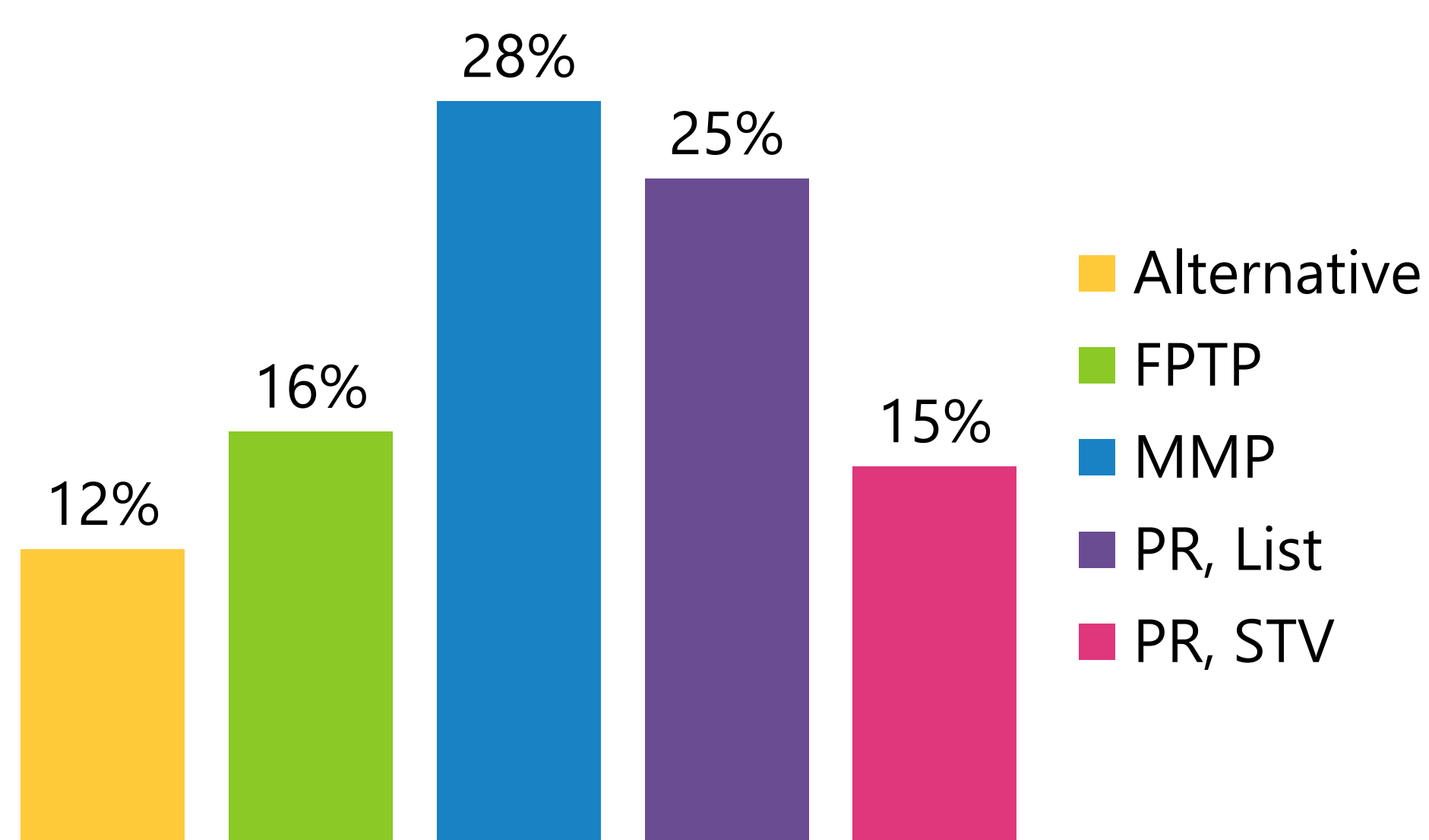
## RESEARCH QUESTION

What is the impact of various electoral systems on the number of women elected to office and on women's interests being represented in government?

## APPROACH

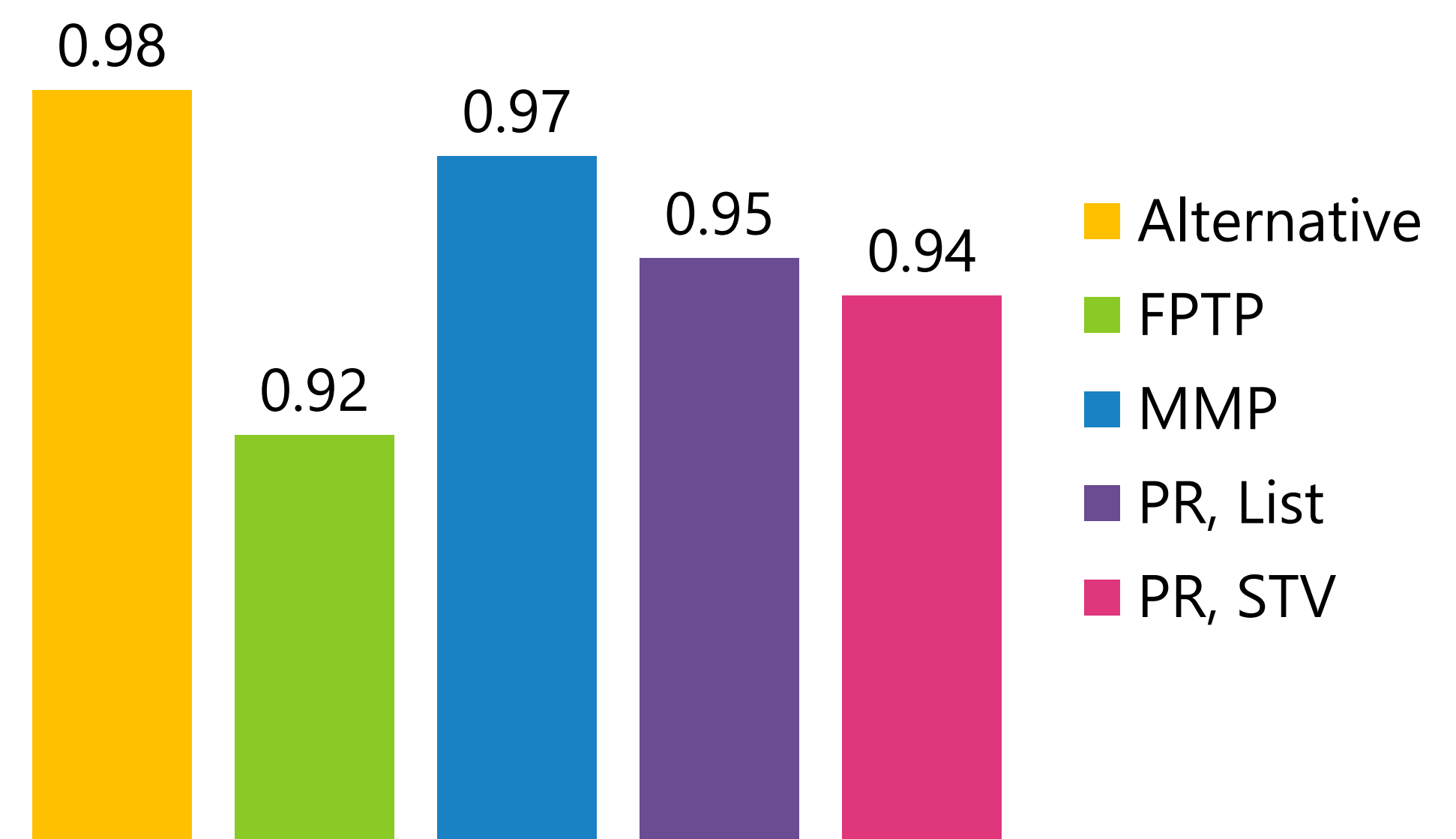
This project combines empirical and theoretical research, primary and secondary sources, and quantitative and qualitative analysis. Using available data from the World Bank, I compared the proportion of seats women hold in national legislatures, on average, according to electoral system. I consulted secondary sources and engaged with theoretical research to define substantive representation for the purposes of this project, which is represented quantitatively by the Gender Development Index (GDI) as reported by the UNDP.

## WOMEN IN PARLIAMENT<sup>1</sup>



SOURCES: World Bank World Development Indicators, Inter-Parliamentary Union, and ACE Electoral Knowledge Network

## AVERAGE GDI<sup>2</sup>



SOURCES: United Nations Development Programme and ACE Electoral Knowledge Network

## CONCLUSIONS

1. First-past-the-post electoral systems consistently correlate with fewer women in office and less discussion of feminist policy priorities.
2. The regional focus of FPTP systems diminishes the relevance of cross-regional political goals, limiting opportunities for discussion of feminist priorities.
3. FPTP is correlated with a lower GDI, while countries with alternative voting and mixed-member proportional representation tended to have higher GDI scores.
4. MMP and list types of PR may be conducive to more opportunities for women in government.
5. Descriptive representation and substantive representation should be considered as distinct feminist initiatives. Pursuing descriptive representation for the sake of substantive representation risks holding female legislators to an unfair standard.

## DISCUSSION

Electoral systems can be conducive or detrimental to gender equality by determining which votes count and by structuring the kinds of issues that are included on the political agenda. Electoral reform should therefore be embraced as a feminist priority. Gender representation, both descriptive and substantive, is one effect of electoral systems that must be considered alongside other impacts. Implementing electoral reform remains a political challenge due to conflicts of interest.