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Theorizing Women's Political Representation: Debates and Innovations in Empirical Research[1]

SARAH CHILDS, MONA LENA KROOK

Introduction

Political representation is a core topic in research on women in politics. Political theorists have focused on developing a wide range of normative arguments for increasing women's political presence. They suggest that women's exclusion from spheres of political decision-making is unfair and undemocratic, leads women's interests to be overlooked, and does not allow society to benefit from women's potential contributions to the political process (Mansbridge 1999; Phillips 1995; Young 2000). Infor-

med by this work, political scientists subject these assumptions to empirical analysis by asking questions like "Do women act for women?" and "Do women in politics make a difference?" They are especially interested in knowing whether an increase in the number of women in political office, or women's descriptive representation, results in greater attention to women's policy concerns, or women's substantive representation. Following Hanna Pitkin's (1967) view that substantive representation is the central and most important type of political representation, some go so far as to assert that the number of women matters only if the women elected are "distinct" in some way from men, for example in their policy priorities and legislative activities (Cowell-Meyers 2001; cf. Phillips 1995).

Empirical studies employ diverse approaches to explore links between the descriptive and substantive representation of women. Together, they focus on five aspects of this relationship: (1) how numbers affect when and whether women to act for women, (2) how political contexts and parliamentary dynamics influence women's legislative behaviour, (3) how identities and interests inform the legislative process, (4) whether women pursue women's interests or prioritize women's issues once they reach political office, and (5) whether women have an impact on the policy-making process. The guiding assumptions of this literature, sometimes explicit but often implicit, is that women's greater presence will produce a "critical mass" in favour of women-friendly policy change, context is less important than commitment to change, sex and gender are primary modes of political identification, women's interests and issues exist "out there" to be brought into the policy process, and voting patterns can offer a good measure of women's impact. When these assumptions have been transformed into testable hypotheses, the evidence has been mixed. Some studies find that the presence of women does indeed alter legislative discourses, proposals, debates, and outcomes (Carroll 2001; Grey 2002; Swers 2002). However, others uncover little or no difference in the styles and behaviours of male and female office-holders (Crowley 2004; Gotell and Brodie 1991; Tremblay/Pelletier 2001).

The inconclusive nature of these results suggests that more nuanced and comprehensive frameworks are needed to understand links, and the absence of links, between women's descriptive and substantive representation. To this end, this article reviews a series of debates in the literature regarding numbers, contexts, identities, issues, and policy-making processes. Within each set of debates, it outlines recent innovations in strategies for analyzing the complex dynamics behind existing patterns of political representation. Viewed together, these discussions offer considerable leverage for explaining what otherwise appear to be puzzling patterns, given the range of current assumptions about women's legislative behaviour. The aim of this exercise is to enable scholars to devise more effective research designs to generate better knowledge regarding women's political presence. The article concludes with a synthesis of these insights to offer a way forward for future research on questions of political representation.

Numbers and Proportions

A common explanation for instances where women do not appear to act for women is that there are simply too few women to make a difference. This argument suggests that women are not likely to have a significant impact until they grow from a few token individuals into a considerable minority, or a "critical mass", of all legislators (Dahlerup 1988). Such intuitions have gained wide currency as a justification for measures like quotas to bring more women into political office. Many international organizations, for example, advocate that their member states aim for 30% women in decision-making positions, on the grounds that 30% constitutes the point at which women may become a critical mass in favour of women-friendly policy change. As a result, many countries have adopted quota policies specifying that women form at least 30% of all candidates and/or those elected to political office (Krook forthcoming).

These assertions are supported by studies showing that legislatures with high proportions of women introduce more bills on women's issues than assemblies where women's numbers are low (Franceschet/Piscopo 2008; Thomas 1994). Other work reveals that as women occupy more seats, the number and rate of enactment of bills on women's issues increases, including as a total proportion of the legislation that women introduce (Saint-Germain 1989). These changes are explained in terms of a more supportive legislative environment linked to the presence of more women, which leads even those who do not view themselves as representatives of women to act on their behalf (Flammang 1985).

A growing literature, however, is sceptical of the magic of numbers. Testing the impact of a "critical mass", defined at levels ranging from 10% to 40% (cf. Beckwith/Cowell-Meyers 2007; Childs 2004; Grey 2002; Thomas 1994), this research finds that policy change does not automatically follow from an increase in the proportion of female legislators. To make sense of these patterns, it focuses on identifying the conditions that may prevent individual women from pursuing reforms on behalf of women as a group. These include party discipline (Beckwith/Cowell-Meyers 2007; Childs 2004), institutional norms (Franceschet 2008; Kathlene 1995), legislative inexperience (Beckwith 2007; Cowley/Childs 2003), and the external political environment, including the electoral system (Zetterberg 2008).

When these various studies are compared, five scenarios emerge as to what may occur as women's numbers increase (Childs/Krook 2006). This diversity suggests that the critical mass perspective may oversimplify links between descriptive and substantive representation in ways that offer little analytical leverage for understanding women's legislative behaviour. Yet, it is possible to transform these scenarios into five hypotheses, which can serve as a more fruitful starting point for matching theory to evidence. The first is that as women grow more numerous, they may be able to form strategic coalitions with one another to promote legislation on women's concerns (Thomas 1994). Second, the presence of more women may influence men's behaviour in a feminist direction, causing both male and female legislators to pay more

attention to women's issues (Flammang 1985). Third, in strong contrast to the critical mass viewpoint, increased numbers of women may instead provoke a backlash among male legislators, who may employ a range of measures to obstruct women's policy initiatives and keep them outside positions of power (Kathlene 1995).
The fourth hypothesis suggested by findings in the literature is that women may in fact be more effective when they form a smaller, rather than a larger, proportion of legislators. On the one hand, their small numbers may enable them to specialize in women's concerns without appearing to undermine male domination (Crowley 2004; Dodson/Carroll 1991). On the other hand, in the absence of a large proportion of women, a well-organized women's caucus may act as a functional substitute by coordinating the actions of the few women in the legislature (Reingold 2000; Thomas 1994). Fifth, as women's numbers grow, the women elected may become increasingly diverse, leading fewer to act for women. This may be because their priorities lie elsewhere, or because they believe that other female legislators will continue to lobby on behalf of women as a group (Carroll 2001; Schwindt-Bayer 2006). Such dynamics may intensify the need for individual policy entrepreneurs to motivate the support of overt and "closet" feminists for women-friendly policy change (Chaney 2006; Childs/Krook 2006).

Political and Parliamentary Contexts

Asking whether women's presence makes a difference tends to frame the investigation in terms of women's agency – and will – to effect policy change. Yet, most studies find that political and parliamentary contexts play a major role in shaping opportunities to translate policy preferences into legislative initiatives on behalf of women. These factors may constrain or enable women to act for women. Synthesizing them is thus crucial for building up more systematic insights on women's legislative behaviour to identify the conditions that may facilitate or undermine links between women's descriptive and substantive representation. For example, rules and norms of political institutions often embody a bias towards men's experiences and authority (Hawkesworth 2003; Mackay 2008). In many instances, these compel women to conform to masculine practices in ways that undermine their ability to integrate women's perspectives in policy-making (Cowell-Meyers 2001).
These challenges may be compounded by the fact that women generally do not occupy high ranking posts in important legislative committees (Norton 1995) and often face repeated challenges to their leadership when they do as a result of gendered norms of power (Kathlene 1995). Further, their relative "newness" may mitigate their potential to influence policy due to their lack of legislative experience (Beckwith 2007; cf. Cowley/Childs 2003). At the same time, however, there may be other rules and norms that promote women's participation and coordinate joint action on women's concerns, like women's caucuses and women's policy machineries (Chaney 2006; Reingold 2000). Similarly, women's access to legislative committees enables them

to influence policy-making from an insider position that was previously unavailable (Swers 2002).

Party affiliation and ideology also have an important impact on women's legislative activities. Most directly, mechanisms of candidate selection determine which women are elected (Gotell/Brodie 1991; Zetterberg 2008). At the same time, norms of party discipline strongly influence the policy positions they are likely to take once in political office (Cowley/Childs 2003). Yet, distinct party ideologies also create varied opportunities for women to pursue feminist policy concerns. While right-wing parties tend to favour more traditional roles for women, left-wing parties can be more open to new opportunities and responsibilities for women and men (Dodson/Carroll 1991). Consequently, the party in power may be crucial in shaping the broader political climate in terms of the emergence and resonance of women-friendly policy concerns (Reingold 2000). This climate may also be informed in important ways by the rise of neo-liberalism, military conflict, recent democratic transition, and the presence of strong women's movements (Beckwith/Cowell-Meyers 2007; Weldon 2002).

Identities and Interests

Studies of women's legislative behaviour often assume – and later discount – sex and gender as primary modes of political identification. This approach has its roots in normative arguments that attempt to discern a shared perspective among women as a group to justify calls for increasing their political presence (Mansbridge 1999; Phillips 1995; Young 2000). Yet, the bulk of empirical work on women's substantive representation emphasizes divisions among women, like race, class, age, and party affiliation, which may prevent the formulation of a collective legislative agenda (Dodson/Carroll 1991; Swers 2002). This diversity suggests that it is crucial to explore how individual identities and interests facilitate, as well as undermine, cooperation among women in political office. Doing so is important for both theoretical and political reasons. As many feminists note, defining a category like "women" may serve to reify one difference while obscuring others (Carroll 2001). By the same token, it is necessary to avoid equating the promotion of feminist policy concerns with the substantive representation of women by eliding women's bodies with feminist minds (Celis et al. 2008; Childs 2004). As various studies have shown, being female may matter less than "gender consciousness" for achieving feminist outcomes (Reingold 2000; Tremblay/Pelletier 2000). Indeed, women may come to office for reasons related to more traditional aspects of their gender identities, for example in their capacity as mothers or as substitutes for their male relatives (Franceschet 2005).

These concerns overlap with debates in the literature on the need to establish differences in the behaviour of women and men in political office. Some claim that women only have an impact when they do not act in the same way as men (Cowell-Meyers 2001; Phillips 1995). However, it is possible to explain convergence according to at least four distinct scenarios, which together present an important methodological critique of this approach, suggesting that it may be more fruitful to explore a variety

of dynamics in the actions of both women and men. First, women and men may share the same policy priorities, but diverge in their support for feminist issues and willingness to propose legislation on such issues (Dodson/Carroll 1991; Schwindt-Bayer 2006). Second, the increased presence of women may lead men to show more interest in women's issues, either to promote women's autonomy or – more ominously – to restrict advances in women's status (Norton 1995; Reingold 2000). Third, the presence of anti-feminist women and pro-feminist men may even out the aggregate balance of preferences across women and men as groups (Chaney 2006; Tremblay and Pelletier 2000). Fourth, gendering processes may silence women by pressuring them to conform to positions taken by men or blocking their opportunities to freely articulate their own views (Hawkesworth 2003). Understanding the dynamics beneath these patterns also has important political undertones, as discourses of "difference" not only retain an emphasis on women as the sex with special interests and experiences, but also place undue responsibility on the shoulders of individual women and enable opponents to argue on the basis of similarities against further increases in women's representation (Childs/Krook 2006).

Women's Interests and Issues

In addition to focusing on women as actors, attempts to analyze links between women's descriptive and substantive representation also often implicitly assume that women's interests and issues exist prior to the policy process. However, despite this faith in easily identifiable interests, scholars – as well as activists and politicians – in fact adopt a range of distinct definitions of "women's interests" and "women's issues". This pattern in itself undermines assertions that such issues are a matter of common agreement. Rather, scholars define these to include policies that achieve equality for women (Tamerius 1995), address women's special needs (Meyer 2003; Schwindt-Bayer 2006), or enable women to undertake their traditional roles as caregivers (Swers 2002). They may also involve any issues of concern to the broader society, on the grounds that all issues are women's issues in some way (Mackay 2001). As a result, lists of "women's interests" may cover issues as diverse as, and encompass opposing positions on, abortion, childcare, divorce, domestic violence, equal pay, equal rights, family issues, parental leave, pensions, rape, reproductive rights, sexual harassment, women's health, and work/life balance.

Several further debates appear across the literature. One concerns the distinction between feminist and non-feminist classifications of women's concerns. Most scholars appear to prefer definitions that focus on role change for women through increases in autonomy and the scope for personal choice (Childs/Withey 2006; Dodson/Carroll 1991; Reingold 2000; Tremblay/Pelletier 2000). Yet, echoing the difference between women's strategic and practical interests put forth by Maxine Molyneux (1985), others opt for more inclusive definitions that capture a broader range of issues affecting women's everyday lives (Swers 2002). A second debate involves the static versus fluid nature of women's interests. Although much of the literature defines

these a priori, a pair of recent studies suggests that a better approach is to examine the concerns articulated by women's movements at various moments in time. This method allows "women's issues" to remain context-related and subject to evolution (Celis 2006), as a collective product that emerges as women interact with other women to identify their priorities (Weldon 2002).
A third divide concerns the spatial and temporal scope of "women's issues". Nearly all existing research on women's representation analyzes political dynamics in developed countries and restricts its focus to the contemporary period. This may explain why scholars tend to focus on issues like reproductive rights and maternity leave. New work on the developing world, however, points out that "women's issues" can also include access to water, child marriage, land ownership, inheritance, dowry, genital cutting, and university admissions (Tripp 2001). Similarly, studies that explore these dynamics from a more historical angle reveal that these involve issues like suffrage, wage labour, and widows' benefits (Celis 2006; Meyer 2003). Avoiding essentialism requires that scholars justify their choices in relation to these various debates.

Policy-Making Processes

Research on the question of whether women make a difference often adopts a wide view of the policy-making process, but especially in the U.S. case, tends to focus on voting patterns as a key measure of women's impact. While this approach is due in part to the fact that the final stage of the legislative process is the most public and easy to observe, it has been criticized on the grounds that it assumes that enactment is the most important stage of the policy-making process (Tamerius 1995). It also overlooks the fact that votes on many women's issues are not even included in the standard databases that collect this information. For this reason, a growing number of scholars have turned to earlier stages of policy-making, noting that the possibility to achieve gains for women depends closely on how and when women's issues reach the legislative agenda. Examining the entire legislative process (Carroll 2001; Norton 1995; Swers 2002), they find that women tend to differ most from men in terms of setting the legislative agenda and proposing bills that address issues of concern to women (Bratton/Ray 2002, Franceschet/ Piscopo 2008; Grey 2002; Swers 2002).
However, others point out that policy-making involves numerous elements of contingency that make these models appear overly simplistic. On the one hand, complex combinations of factors, often in a series of chance events, are generally responsible for moving an issue to agenda prominence and gaining its passage (Childs/Withey 2006). On the other hand, policy innovations rarely proceed in a vacuum. In particular, policy cycles and demonstration effects strongly condition which issues enter and are kept of legislative agendas, separate from any assumed prerequisites for change (Bratton/Ray 2002). These effects, in turn, raise broader questions regarding the definition of "impact", which may extend to arenas beyond policy-making, for example by leading to increased political engagement among female constituents (Mackay 2001). These considerations suggest that efforts to understand the links between

women's descriptive and substantive representation must adopt a more nuanced view of the policy-making process in order to more accurately assess the effects of women's presence.

Conclusions

There is a rich and growing body of research on women's political representation. To ensure that this literature offers new and cumulative contributions, it is crucial that studies integrate and reflect on the methodological insights of previous work, which have important implications for how scholars theorize and analyze the links between women's descriptive and substantive representation. This article suggests that traditional research designs begin with a range of assumptions that have often been falsified in subsequent empirical investigation, namely that numbers affect when and whether women to act for women, context is less important than commitment to change, sex and gender are primary modes of political identification, women's interests and issues can be identified prior to the legislative process, and voting patterns offer the best measure of women's impact on policy-making. Through trial and error, scholars have made several discoveries that, taken together, present an opportunity to engage in more nuanced studies of women's legislative behaviour.

First, an increase in the numbers of women elected may lead to any one of several different scenarios. It may enable women to work together for policy change, as predicted by critical mass theory. However, the presence of more women may also influence men's behaviour in a feminist direction, provoke a backlash among male legislators, cause women to be less effective than when they form a smaller proportion of legislators, or lead fewer to act for women as they espouse more diverse interests as a group. Second, context plays a major role in determining possibilities for translating policy preferences into legislative initiatives, related to the masculine nature of political institutions, the lack of women in positions of legislative power, the general "newness" of female legislators, the presence or absence of women's caucuses, the norm of party discipline, and the ideology of the party in power.

Third, female politicians may or may not view sex and gender as central facets of their identities. They may prioritize other identities, like race or class, and may be explicitly anti-feminist in their ideological orientations. Similarly, men in politics may promote feminist concerns, or take active steps to prevent changes in women's status and silence female legislators, resulting in few apparent differences in women's and men's legislative behaviour. Fourth, definitions of "women's interests" and "women's issues" vary widely, ranging from policies that achieve equality for women to those that enable women to undertake their traditional roles as care-givers. They may also diverge across feminist and non-feminist classifications, static and more fluid conceptions, and spatial and temporal boundaries. Fifth, voting may be a less useful, and possibly even misleading, measure of women's impact when compared to earlier points in the policy-making process. Further, the contingent nature of policy-making suggests that scholars may need to gain close familiarity with the political context in

order to understand the degree to which it is possible for individual women to shape legislative outcomes.

Together, these various debates suggest a number of new directions for future research on the links between women's descriptive and substantive representation. One solution is to begin with some of these observations as a means for generating alternative research designs. For example, one might ask questions like: What elements of the political context affect the propensity of female MPs to act for women? How do female politicians define "women's issues"? Do female legislators claim to act for women – and if so, what types of activities does this involve? A second solution is to explore dynamics of political representation within and beyond the legislative arena. This approach avoids a priori decisions about the actors, sites, and outcomes involved women's substantive representation. Asking "who" acts opens up the investigation to a much wider range of possible players, including male and female legislators, cabinet ministers, party members, bureaucrats, and civil society groups. Exploring "where" the substative representation of women occurs considers multiple locations of representation, including parliaments but also extending to other political forums, like cabinets, women's policy agencies, non-governmental organizations, courts, and civil society. Finally, asking "how" the SRW is expressed makes it necessary to explore interventions at various points in the political process to identify the claims made on behalf of women, the actions taken to promote 'women's interests,' and the outcomes of these attempts (Celis et al. 2008). These solutions do not exhaust the possibilities, but instead indicate that political representation remains a fertile field for studies of women, gender, and politics.

Anmerkungen

1 This article is inspired by our co-authored work and conversations over the last four years, as we have sought to rethink how to theorize and analyze the substantive representation of women. We are also influenced by joint papers and workshops with Karen Celis and Johanna Kantola.

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