

Women in Parliaments: Descriptive and Substantive Representation

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Abstract

This essay reviews two research programs. The first focuses on variations in the number of women elected to national parliaments in the world (descriptive representation), and the second focuses on effects of women's presence in parliament (substantive representation). The theory of the politics of presence (Phillips 1995) provides reasons for expecting a link between descriptive and substantive representation. The safest position would be to say that results are “mixed” when it comes to empirical support for the theory of the politics of presence. However, when a large number of studies covering a wide set of indicators on the importance of gender in the parliamentary process are piled together, the picture that emerges shows that female politicians contribute to strengthening the position of women's interests.

INTRODUCTION

The number of women in parliaments is currently increasing throughout the world. Ten years ago the average proportion of women in national parliaments was 11.7%; today it is 18.3% (an increase of 6.6 percentage points). The trend is perhaps even clearer if, instead of comparing world averages, we compare the number of countries where women make up >30% of members in the national parliament. Ten years ago there was only one such country—Sweden; now, as of September 30, 2008, there are 22 (figures from the Inter-Parliamentary Union website <http://www.ipu.org>).

There is a growing body of literature that seeks to explain the increases in the numbers of women elected. It is apparent that changes do not happen automatically. **Conscious acts by actors such as political parties**, with the specific aim of getting more women elected, are an important factor behind the increases. However, parties do not exist in a vacuum. **The literature reveals an interplay between parties and interest groups such as women's organizations, and also between these kinds of actors and structures of society.** The type of **electoral system** matters for the number of women elected, as does the type of welfare state.

In research on women in parliaments, there is a much-used distinction between **descriptive and substantive representation.** **This distinction roughly corresponds with whether the focus is on the number of women elected or on the effects of women's presence in parliament.** In 1995 the influential book *The Politics of Presence* was published (Phillips 1995). The theory of the **politics of presence** suggests that female politicians are best equipped to represent the interests of women; thus, the theory predicts a link between descriptive and substantive representation. Phillips's argument is built upon differences between women and men in their everyday lives, such as differences relating to child-rearing, education and occupations, divisions of paid and unpaid labor, exposure to violence and sexual harassment, and the fact that

female politicians, at least to some extent, share the experiences of other women. Few deny that gender-related differences exist in contemporary societies; however, the connection to the political sphere is disputed. Phillips herself used the expression a **"shot in the dark"** (1995, p. 83) in reference to expectations for female politicians to affect politics in any specific ways. Her doubt stemmed from her knowledge about rigidity in political institutions; parliaments do not change easily.

This essay on women in parliaments is organized around the distinction between descriptive and substantive representation. I show that even though the two research programs are interconnected, they constitute distinct tracks with their own sets of theoretical reasoning and tools for doing empirical research. Research focusing on descriptive representation represents a more mature research field. This is partly because of the longer history of this tradition; as early as the 1950s, Duverger (1955) highlighted the role of electoral systems in determining the number of women elected. It is equally important to note that in research on descriptive representation there is a distinct, easily calculated, dependent variable: What is to be explained is the numerical distribution of seats between women and men. Comparisons are made across countries and across time. Comparisons are also made between subnational units, such as between different parties or local legislatures.

Research on substantive representation is less mature. This is partly because there used to be very few countries with any substantial number of women elected. There are, as already hinted, additional complexities that, for example, relate to the way parliaments function as institutions. Some findings reveal that, once elected, female politicians meet certain obstacles. A fourth reason is that, in comparison to research on descriptive representation, the dependent variable is more diffuse or multifaceted. It is not self-evident what an increased number of women in parliament will most affect: Internal working procedures? Policy outcomes? Trust in government? Or something

else? However, the body of literature in this strand of research is growing, and recent empirical results demonstrate that an increased proportion of women in parliament is more reliable than a shot in the dark: Societies that elect large numbers of women tend to be more gender-equal also in other respects than societies that elect few women.

My review focuses on women in parliaments in established democracies. However, especially when it comes to research on descriptive representation, the perspective has to be widened. There is at present a global quota trend that has resulted in rather surprising rankings among countries. The Nordic countries—as is widely recognized—hold a leading position, with the proportion of women in national parliaments averaging 41.4%. But among individual countries, Rwanda is currently on top of the list (48.8%), Sweden is number two (47.0%), Cuba number three (43.2%), and Finland number four (41.5%).

THEORIES ON WOMEN'S INTERESTS

The assumption that women have certain interests in common is a main thread in studies on women in parliaments. However, in research focusing on descriptive representation, the theoretical reasoning behind this assumption is not well elaborated. In order to analyze numeric differences between countries, or numeric changes over time, far-reaching definitions of women's interests are not necessary. It is widely acceptable to use the share of seats in parliament as an indicator of political inclusion in society for a category such as women. In this strand of research, the theoretical focus is instead directed toward developing explanations for variations.

In studies focusing on substantive representation, it is, however, necessary to specify concepts such as "women's interests" and "gender equality." A core idea in this strand of research is that there are certain interests and concerns that arise from women's experiences and that these will be inadequately addressed in a politics that

is dominated by men. However, the concept of women's interests is contested. Contemporary debates concern features of elitism in gender research—that is, a tendency to ascribe interests to women in a top-down fashion—and also features of essentialism: the tendency to view women and men as fixed, rather than changeable, categories. Debates also concern how gender is related to categories such as ethnicity, age, and class (Dietz 2003).¹

One way to handle such controversies is to let politically active women themselves define women's interests or what they perceive as gender equality; this strand of research relies on what are labeled "subjectively defined interests" (e.g., Celis 2006). Other researchers elaborate theoretically founded definitions that are sensitive to diversity among women but also state some common ground (e.g., Lovenduski & Norris 2003, Wängnerud 2000a). In practice, these different approaches often produce similar lists of women's interests. Phillips's reasoning in *The Politics of Presence* is an example of mainstream argumentation:

Women have distinct interests in relation to child-bearing (for any foreseeable future, an exclusively female affair); and as society is currently constituted they also have particular interests arising from their exposure to sexual harassment and violence, their unequal position in the division of paid and unpaid labor and their exclusion from most arenas of economic or political power. (Phillips 1995, pp. 67–68)

When Phillips concretizes what women can gain from increased political inclusion, she stresses context; women's interests are connected to how societies are currently constituted. If we look at contemporary societies, we see noteworthy differences between women and

¹The concept of interests is not limited to gender research. It is "ubiquitous" (Pitkin 1967, p. 156) in debates on representation. To differentiate interests is a matter of concretizing that which various groups can expect to gain through political inclusion.

men in their everyday life situations. It is therefore interesting to ask about the extent to which an increase in the number of women elected affects how societies function. The contextual approach implies that concepts such as women's interests and gender equality are anchored in time and space; this means that more exact definitions have to be worked out in relation to the actual parliament studied. One problem here, though, is that even the most carefully contextually anchored definition will necessarily end up a bit simplified. However, when I review recent empirical research on substantive representation of women I conclude that this is a risk worth taking. **Gender serves as a lens that makes important issues in the field of representation visible: Whom do elected politicians represent? What is at stake in the parliamentary process? What do we know about the interplay between parliaments and the everyday lives of citizens? Gender research adds new fuel to all these classic debates.**

In research on substantive representation of women, an aspect of politicization is introduced. It is commonly argued that societies will not achieve equality between women and men by simply disregarding gender-related differences (Phillips 2007, p. 127). This is not always spelled out clearly in the literature; however, I think most authors would agree that in gender-equal democracies, women and men are equally able to choose between alternatives that address their specific concerns. **The theory of the politics of presence stipulates that equal rights to a vote are not strong enough to guarantee this; there must also be equality among those elected to office.**

RESEARCH ON DESCRIPTIVE REPRESENTATION: NUMBER OF WOMEN IN PARLIAMENTS

Owing to a recent worldwide quota trend, conventional wisdom regarding explanations for variations in the number of women elected is partly outdated. However, it is still valid to review more established explanatory factors and discuss their strengths. In this section, I first

review research on **gender and parliamentary recruitment in Western democracies** and then widen the perspective. The discussion is restricted to factors connected to national parliaments' lower or single houses.

Norris (1993, p. 311) has worked out a **model of parliamentary recruitment in Western democracies emphasizing the political system, the party context, and supply and demand factors in the recruitment process**. Factors included under the label "political system" are the electoral system, party system and legislative competition. **Factors included under the label "party context" are party ideology and party organization**. The picture of the recruitment process includes social background as a determinant for required resources to become an elected representative as well as for motivation. Resources and motivation are then described as decisive factors for who gets into the pool of the eligible. Further obstacles that must be overcome before one gets elected are the judgments of **gatekeepers and voters**. The model also indicates that the outcome of the election has a feedback effect on motivation; if only a few women are elected, or if women are elected only occasionally, this might enforce the idea that politics is "a man's game."

One of the most stable results in empirical research is that the election of women is favored by electoral systems with party lists, proportional representation (PR), and large district magnitudes. The conventional wisdom used to be that these systems are less competitive than majority systems based on single-member districts. In a single-member system, a woman has to be the number-one choice for her party in order to take part in the race. In a PR system with large district magnitudes, a woman can be placed further down on the party list and still be elected (Matland & Brown 1992, Norris 1996, Rule 1987). However, this wisdom also maintains that PR tends to favor party systems with a large number of parties and also means greater possibilities for new parties to enter the parliamentary arena. In this sense a PR system is very competitive. Empirical studies show that once one party picks up the issue of gender equality,

and makes the increased election of women an issue, other parties within the same system tend to follow suit. This logic can be explained by policy diffusion, a wish to pick up new ideas, and strategic considerations; parties are striving for power, and gender equality is one among a number of weapons that can be used in electoral competition (Kittilson 2006, Lovenduski & Norris 1993).

There is no doubt that the political system is relevant in cross-country research. However, cross-country studies tend to miss variations between parties within a single system. Variations in the proportion of women to men are even greater across parties than across nations. One of the earliest findings in the field of party context was that leftist ideology is a strong predictor for a high number of women elected. However, this pattern is weaker than it used to be. Substantial increases are found in most party families in Western democracies, even though religious and ultraright parties still have few women elected (Kittilson 2006). Kittilson (2006, p. 48) has distinguished between “old left” and “new left” political ideologies, and her analysis shows that new left ideology is a decisive factor in cross-party, cross-country comparative research. Parties that value environment over economic growth and are pro-permissive in social policy tend to have more women elected. In addition to party ideology, party organization matters: A centralized organization is favorable for women, but even more important is that the party organization has ties with organizations outside the party, because these provide more points of access for women (Kittilson 2006, pp. 48–49).

To be elected, women must first be willing to stand as candidates. However, recent studies show that the idea of a smooth process in which higher numbers of women in the pool of the eligible automatically spill over to higher numbers among the elected representatives is too simple. In Western democracies, the number of women elected, in many cases, has not grown incrementally but rather in “punctuated and sometimes dramatic increases” (Kittilson 2006, p. 10). This finding puts internal processes within parties,

the main gatekeeper in the recruitment process, at the center of the analysis.

Recent studies point to conscious acts by party leadership, such as the implementation of gender quotas or other gender-specific measures, as important determinants of the number of women elected (Freidenvall 2006, Kittilson 2006, Studlar & McAllister 2002). During past decades, the number of women elected has also increased in parties that have never adopted quotas; however, the average number of women elected is significantly higher in parties that have adopted quotas. Kittilson (2006) compares 71 parties in Western Europe between 1975 and 1995. In 1975 few parties had adopted quotas, and the average number of women elected was on the same level, about 10%, in each of the party groupings in her study. In 1995 the average number of women elected had increased to 35% in parties with quotas (21 parties in the sample) and to 25% in parties without quotas (50 parties in the sample). She divides parties with quotas into two subgroups: those that adopted quotas between 1975 and 1985, and those that adopted quotas between 1986 and 1991. Kittilson (2006, p. 64) demonstrates that averages within quota parties, in each separate subset, jumped above averages within non-quota parties shortly after quotas were adopted. Parties with quotas also remain on a high average level.

The literature on causes behind the election of large numbers of women reveals a shift, at least in Western democracies, from system-oriented toward strategy-oriented explanatory models (Wängnerud 2000b). Strategy-oriented explanatory models dig into processes endogenous to parties, whereas system-oriented explanatory models explore exogenous processes. This shift does not mean that the framework for parliamentary recruitment worked out by Norris has become obsolete; it still serves as a good overview and spells out important factors. However, other layers or steps in the process have to be developed more fully. Timing and framing are two examples of concepts used in strategy-oriented research to capture the mechanisms at work. The strategy-oriented strand

of research also points to the importance of actions taken by women themselves, often in a joint venture **between women's movements and women at higher ranks within the party structures**. Timing and framing are strategies to increase support within party machineries; if the time is "right" and the packaging "appetizing," quests for increased gender equality will have a fairly good chance of gaining support (Kittilson 2006, Lovenduski & Norris 1993).

Cultural Explanations and Socioeconomics

From the start of cross-country research on women in parliaments, regional differences have been a recurrent finding. The high percentage within the Nordic region (41.4%) is exceptional, and perhaps even more remarkable is that within this region the number of women elected has been high for quite a long time. In the 1980s the expression "*Norden—the passion for equality*" was coined (Graubard 1986). This slogan alludes to values deeply embedded in society.

Gender culture can be defined as societal ideals, meanings, and values that have gender connotations (Pfau-Effinger 1998). In the book *Rising Tide: Gender Equality and Cultural Change around the World*, Inglehart & Norris (2003) emphasize the importance of a gender-equality culture in which women have opportunities for upward mobility. The opposite of a gender-equality culture is one where traditional gender values prevail. Inglehart & Norris construct a gender-equality scale from measurements of citizens' attitudes regarding women as political leaders, women's professional and educational rights, and women's traditional mother role. The empirical findings show that the gender-equality scale correlates with the number of women in parliament (Inglehart & Norris 2003, p. 138).²

²The correlation is strong (0.57, level of significance .01), yet there are outliers to the general pattern; some established democracies like Australia and the United States display more egalitarian attitudes than might be expected given the

Inglehart & Norris are not the first to emphasize culture, and the major contribution of their book is the vast amount of empirical data they provide, covering almost all parts of the world. However, the cultural explanation has been criticized for being unable to capture short-term change. It has also been criticized for being almost a tautology (Sainsbury 1993, Rosenbluth et al. 2006). Nonetheless, regional differences are a persistent feature of worldwide comparisons, and additional studies substantiate the view that gender-related values are important in this field (Paxton & Kunovich 2003, Studlar & McAllister 2002, Teigen & Wängnerud 2009).

A pattern in the literature is that researchers doing worldwide comparisons on the number of women elected emphasize different factors from those emphasized by researchers doing more geographically restricted analyses. The time perspective used is also important in determining the kinds of factors that stand out as decisive. Wide's (2006) analysis includes 74 to 179 countries during the postwar period 1950–2005; numbers of countries vary according to how many states are independent and also have parliaments. Wide shows that until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the year of the introduction of female suffrage and the appearance of communist regimes are the most decisive factors. The communist regimes in Eastern and central Europe practiced a system of gender quotas. In the period after 1990, proportional electoral system is the most decisive factor and, in addition to the use of gender quotas, has a significant effect. Wide (2006) also shows that during the whole period from 1950 to the present, Protestantism and high levels of economic development correlate positively with a high number of women elected (see also Studlar & McAllister 2002). Other large-*n* studies show that socioeconomic factors, such as women's share in professional occupations,

proportion of women elected to parliament. Inglehart & Norris (2003, p. 139) conclude that in those countries "public opinion seems to run ahead of the opportunities that woman have when pursuing public office."

have an impact (Kenworthy & Malami 1999, Matland 1998, Salmond 2006).

The Recent Postcommunism Quota Trend

In the book *Women, Quotas and Politics*, Dahlerup (2006a) and colleagues analyze the recent postcommunism quota trend. Gender quotas are generally understood as formalized measures with the specific aim of increasing the number of women elected. There are 40 countries where gender quotas in elections to national parliaments have been implemented by means of constitutional amendment or by changing the electoral laws; these are legal quotas. In another 50 countries, major political parties have set out quota provisions in their own statutes; these are party quotas (Dahlerup 2006a; for current research debates on gender quotas, see theme articles collected under the title Gender Quotas I & II in *Politics & Gender* 2005 and 2006 respectively).

The recent quota trend can be traced to Norway at the beginning of the 1970s, when the Socialist Left Party implemented gender quotas regarding seats in internal party settings, such as the Party Board, as well as external party candidate lists. However, many observers point out that it was the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, 1995, that sparked changes. The use of gender quotas is becoming especially frequent in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa. Dahlerup (2006a, p. 4) suggests an international contagion effect was important for the spread; for some countries, the implementation of quotas reflects a wish to appear “modern” in the international community. Dahlerup reflects that state-driven political inclusion of women might foremost be symbolic.

The present quota trend causes a special kind of historical leap in many economically less developed countries. As mentioned above, Kittilson (2006) states that dramatic increases are also a part of the story in Western democracies. But in other parts of the world, there is an even stronger divergence between changes in

the number of women elected and changes in the status of women in society more generally.

Dahlerup (2006a) and colleagues distinguish between fast-track and incremental models regarding the number of women elected; however, there are no clear boundaries here. Whether changes are seen as fast or not depends on the reference points used. However, if the development in Sweden is contrasted with the development in Rwanda, the differences in the models are striking. By the beginning of the 1970s, parties in Sweden had started to implement measures, often referred to as soft quotas, in order to increase the number of women elected. During the 1970s Sweden crossed the threshold of 20% women in parliament; the proportion climbed past 30% during the 1980s and 40% during the 1990s. This step-by-step development, spanning almost four decades, lies behind the current figure of 47.0% women in the Swedish parliament (Bergqvist et al. 2000, Freidenvall 2006). Rwanda's situation is much different. Whereas Sweden's twentieth-century history is characterized by political stability, economic growth, and peace, Rwanda is one of the poorest countries in the world, and its modern history contains disastrous wars. Gender quotas were implemented in Rwanda as a part of the reconciliation process after the genocide in 1994. In 1994 women made up 17.1% of the national parliament in Rwanda. After the election in 2003, the number was 48.8%. The number of women tripled in less than ten years (Devlin & Elgie 2008).

Corruption, Welfare State, Labor Market Characteristics, and Voter Preferences

Before ending this section on descriptive representation, I draw attention to some additional factors discussed in the literature on women in parliaments: corruption, the type of welfare state, labor market characteristics, and voter preferences. These factors are shedding new light on the processes at work; however, they are not yet firmly included in the research canon.

Studies on corruption, such as those initiated by researchers at the World Bank, find evidence of a relationship between the number of women in parliament and the level of corruption: The higher the number of women in the national parliament of a country the lower the level of corruption (Dollar et al. 2001). However, the causal direction of the relationship is not clear, and Sung (2003, p. 718) observes that “[g]ender equality and government accountability are both great achievements of modern liberal democracy.” Sung confirms, though, that the degree of “fairness” or “cleanness” in a system is of importance for women’s ability to achieve politically important positions.

Rosenbluth et al. (2006) use Nordic/Scandinavian exceptionalism as the starting point of an analysis intended to explain the mechanisms by which the expansion of the welfare state facilitates women’s entry into politics. The Nordic region is characterized not only by the high proportion of women elected to its parliaments but also by its encompassing “cradle-to-grave” welfare states. The key link between female legislative representation and the Nordic type of welfare state is presented in three steps: Welfare state policies free women to enter the paid workforce; they provide public sector jobs that, to a disproportionate degree, employ women; and hence the political interests of working women are changed enough to create an ideological gender gap (see Hernes 1987).

The results reported by Rosenbluth et al. (2006) show that increases in government (non-military) expenditure are consistently associated with increases in the number of women elected, and the results hold when controlled for factors such as left ideology and female labor force participation. However, the parties are still gatekeepers in the recruitment process. Increasing the number of female candidates is described by Rosenbluth and colleagues as a “fruitful” step for a party to take in order to “exploit” the gender gap created by a new set of preferences.

The case of the United States presents a paradox. The number of women elected to the

U.S. Congress is lower, 16.8% in 2008, than would be predicted from female labor force participation and egalitarian attitudes among citizens. Iversen & Rosenbluth (2008) suggest that the political arena can be analyzed as a job-market arena. In candidate-centered political systems, such as the U.S. system, seniority and uninterrupted careers matter more than in party-centered political systems, and constituency services are highly emphasized. Women aspiring to a parliamentary position are hit harder by the need to take time off for child care and other family duties.

Some research on gender differences among voters relates to research on women in parliaments. One important finding from time-series approaches is that gender differences among the citizenry tend to be pervasive; they reflect societal conditions and exist outside the context of specific elections (Box-Steffensmeier et al. 2004). In addition, the dynamics of a specific election—whether high-profile women take part and/or whether women’s issues are high on the agenda—affect these differences or gender gaps. Ondercin & Bernstein (2007, p. 50) conclude, “The voice of women in the electorate is heard more loudly when a woman articulates the views on which women and men differ.” However, the specific issues that generate gender differences in each election vary (Cutler 2002, Dolan 2005, Koch 2002). The research instrument plays an important role; the kinds of gender-related patterns that arise relate to the kinds of issues that are included, for example, in questionnaires.

There is some evidence that female voters are more supportive of female politicians than male voters are (Banducci & Karp 2000). However, some findings indicate that female voters tend to overestimate the actual number of women in parliamentary positions to a larger extent than male voters do. If our knowledge were more accurate, the issue of gender equality in parliament would perhaps be more strongly prioritized (Sanbonmatsu 2003).

The literature on descriptive representation of women brings forward a broad spectrum of explanatory factors. I perceive the challenge

Table 1 Explanatory factors brought forward in research on variations in the number of women elected to national parliaments (descriptive representation)

| Macro-level variables | Meso-level variables | Micro-level variables |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|---|
| year of female suffrage | party ideology | voter preferences |
| religion | party organization | motivation among women to be candidates |
| gender-equality culture | party gender quotas | |
| system cleanness | women's movement | |
| electoral system | timing and framing | |
| welfare state system | dynamics in specific elections | |
| legal gender quotas | contagion effects across parties | |
| government (nonmilitary) expenditure | | |
| socioeconomics | | |
| contagion effects across countries | | |

for future research to be the building of fine-tuned models that specify relationships. Even though research in this field is mature and uses sophisticated methods for data analysis, many studies test the impact of one “favorite” factor while controlling for some “standard” factors. Macro-level variables still dominate research on women’s descriptive representation. However, a promising trend is found in research (e.g., Kittilson 2006) that scrutinizes the interplay between structures of society and actors such as political parties and women’s movements. **Table 1** facilitates an overview of explanatory factors brought forward in research on descriptive representation.

RESEARCH ON SUBSTANTIVE REPRESENTATION: EFFECTS OF WOMEN IN PARLIAMENTS

What do women do in parliaments? In most Western democracies, it is possible to find prominent female politicians in areas such as foreign affairs and finance, as well as in areas such as education or family policy. However, the core issue in research on substantive representation does not concern “what women do in parliaments” **but, more specifically, the extent to which the number of women elected affects women’s interests.** Phillips (1995, p. 47) argues that gender equality among those elected to office is desirable because of the changes it can

bring about: “It is representation . . . with a purpose, it aims to subvert or add or transform.”

In the introduction to this essay, I stated that research on substantive representation of women is a less mature field than research on descriptive representation. One indicator of this is the lack of agreement in the literature on what effects to expect when the number of women in parliament increases. In fact, much of the current research debate on substantive representation of women concerns hindrances to female politicians. The point is made that substantial change—whatever that means—cannot be taken for granted just because a group, such as women, is taking part in decision making to a larger extent than before. The link between descriptive and substantive representation that is suggested by the theory of the politics of presence is probabilistic rather than deterministic (Dodson 2006).

The relationship between descriptive and substantive representation is hard to capture, but the problems in this field of research should not be overemphasized. The review in this section shows that a reasonable set of indicators is being used in empirical research and that these indicators can serve as a base for further developments. Before I get to research on effects of the increased number of women elected, I review research on hindrances to female politicians. This research is concerned with preconditions for change.

Preconditions for Change

The concept of “critical mass” is intensely debated. Some scholars seek to identify a threshold number or a “tipping point” at which the impact of women’s presence in parliaments becomes apparent; a figure of ~30% is often mentioned. However, others criticize the concept of critical mass as being too mechanical and implying immediate change at a certain level. They focus instead on “critical acts” (Dahlerup 1988) to explore two questions: Who is pushing for change consistent with women’s interests, and what kinds of strategies are useful (Dahlerup 2006b; Childs & Krook 2006)? Still others (e.g., Grey 2006) suggest that different thresholds have to be recognized in studies on women in parliaments; for example, attaining a proportion of 15% may allow female politicians to change the political agenda, but 40% is needed for women-friendly policies to be introduced.

Hindrances to female politicians, such as hostile reactions to women, working conditions incompatible with family responsibilities, and the existence of male-dominated networks are suggested in the literature. Lovenduski (2005a, p. 48) argues that the most difficult obstacle is the deeply embedded culture of masculinity in political institutions. She points out gender biases in personnel, in policy, and in cultures of political organizations (Lovenduski 2005a, p. 52).

The question of how the presence of women affects behavior and culture within political institutions is multi-layered. The question is not just about whether women behave differently, or whether they meet certain obstacles, or whether, beyond a certain threshold of numbers, they are able to make an impact. The question is also whether their presence has an impact on the behavior of men, either reinforcing gender differences or modifying them. In addition, it is important to take into account some less gender-specific factors in the analyses of impact. Grey (2006) points to the importance of the institutional positions of the female politicians in question, the time women have spent in office, and their own as well as

their political party’s ideology. Beckwith (2007) summarizes much of the discussion by stating that both numbers and newness must be taken into account when analyzing gender; being new in parliament is widely recognized as a factor that diminishes possibilities for impact.

The importance of newness is supported by empirical results from Jeydel & Taylor (2003), who show that when factors such as seniority and institutional position are taken into account, there is no real demonstrable difference between the effectiveness of women and men in the U.S. House of Representatives. Two measures of effectiveness are used in their study: percentage of bills sponsored by a member of Congress that were passed into law and the distribution among congressional districts of federal money to implement domestic policy.

However, the suggestion that impact in parliaments is related not only to levels of seniority but also to gender understood in a “purer” sense also coincides with results from empirical research. Haavio-Mannila et al. (1983) distinguish two kinds of divisions between women and men: those related to formal power (hierarchical gender structures) and those related to policy areas (functional gender structures). Research on functional structures has focused on parliamentary committee assignments, and the patterns displayed with respect to femininity and masculinity are puzzling.

Thomas (1994) is a pioneer of empirical research on gender and committee assignments. In an analysis on state legislators in the United States, she follows developments over time: In the 1970s, women representatives were concentrated in a very narrow set of committees, most often education committees; however, in the 1980s, women were found in all kinds of committees. However, the proportion of women and men was not equal on all types of committees. A 1988 survey showed that women were significantly more likely than men to be assigned to health and welfare committees; women were also less likely than men to sit on committees dealing with business and private economic concerns (Thomas 1994, p. 66).

Thomas also investigates the extent to which committee assignments reflect priorities among male and female politicians. Her conclusion from the 1988 survey was that gender patterns resulted from legislators' choices rather than coercion or discrimination (Thomas 1994, p. 67).

In studies on committee assignments in the Swedish parliament, the time perspective is wider. Wängnerud (1998) focuses on standing committees during the period 1970–1996. The data reveal that the division between male and female policy areas was especially clear-cut in the 1980s and early 1990s. However, the Swedish election of 1994 was followed by a notable change; previous gender patterns, very much in line with those reported by Thomas (1994) for U.S. state legislators, almost disappeared. **In the present Swedish parliament, there is only one standing committee with <40% women, and that is the committee on social insurance, a formerly heavily female-dominated area (L. Wängnerud, unpublished material).**

Several conclusions can be drawn from research on gender and committee assignments. The first is that patterns of functional divisions between women and men in parliaments cannot be satisfactorily explained by factors such as the number of years politicians have spent in parliament, their party affiliation, or their age. **The overall picture is that functional divisions stem from men's and women's different preferences for committees.** However, there is also empirical support for the existence of stereotyping processes; women displaying typical “male” preferences met special obstacles, for example, in the Swedish parliament during earlier time periods. Another important finding from time-series approaches is that the magnitude as well as the shape of the functional division varies over time. It is also important to state that there are no obvious correlations between functional divisions and the status of different policy areas (Wängnerud 1998; for a different view on status see Heath et al. 2005).

The literature provides no clear-cut answer to the question of what obstacles female politi-

cians meet. The most important conclusion to be drawn from my review of research on hindrances for female politicians is that no strong empirical evidence supports the idea that women are **merely symbolic representatives**. It would be far-fetched to say that women's room to maneuver in parliaments in Western democracies is severely undermined by their gender.

Indicators of Attitudes, Priorities, and Policy Promotion

The point of departure for the theory of the politics of presence is sociological. Female politicians are expected to be better equipped to represent the interests of female voters because they, at least to some extent, share the same experiences. There are plenty of counter-hypotheses to this expectation—for example, that ideology is what matters in politics, that social characteristics such as class or ethnicity are more decisive than gender, and that parliamentary institutions influence politicians more than politicians are able to influence them (meaning that women entering parliament become just like the male politicians who preceded them).

It goes without saying that parliaments are complex institutions and that it is a methodological challenge to empirically test the theory of the politics of presence. One suggestion is that studies in this field ought to be longitudinal in design; we should follow what happens “from the start” when women are few, up to the point where women are present in large numbers (Beckwith 2007). Longitudinal designs of this kind are hard to conduct. An alternative is to use a wide range of indicators in cross-section analysis and include control variables in order to isolate effects of gender.

Thomas (1994) does cross-section research that includes more than one time-point and uses a wide set of indicators. In her book *How Women Legislate*, she distinguishes between legislative procedures and legislative products. Legislative procedures include activities such as making speeches, working with colleagues, and bargaining with lobbyists. Legislative products include voting records, issue attitudes, and policy

priorities. Thomas's findings show a closing gap between women and men concerning procedures; however, when it comes to products, the gap does not appear to be closing. "Today," Thomas (1994, p. 7) concludes, "women legislators embrace priorities dealing with issues of women, and children and the family. Men do not share this priority list."

Recent empirical research demonstrates an ambition to further develop measurements for legislative products. **Some choose to structure their analysis around dimensions such as policy style, agenda, and outcomes (Squires & Wickham-Jones 2001), and others choose dimensions such as legislative voting, parliamentary roles, and ideological values** (Lovenduski & Norris 2003). I have chosen to structure this review around attitudes, priorities, and policy promotion because these dimensions capture the bulk of recent empirical research.

Gender differences in politicians' attitudes have been studied rather frequently. There is an agreement in research that gender has an impact; what varies between studies is the strength of the impact (Esaiasson & Holmberg 1996, Lovenduski & Norris 2003, McAllister & Studlar 1992, Narud & Valen 2000, Norris & Lovenduski 1995). Even though the magnitude is disputed, the direction of the gender gap in attitudes is fairly clear: **Women in parliaments tend to be more leftist than men, and they tend to be more favorable toward new policies, such as those concerned with environmental protection.** Differences also appear on issues that can be defined as women's interests, such as social policy (women support more permissive policies); pornography (women are more skeptical); and affirmative actions such as introducing gender quotas (women are more in favor). Suggestions have been made that gender differences appear on issues that are not yet central to parties (Heidar & Pedersen 2006).

Research on attitudes highlights the **importance of party affiliation.** Some attitudes, such as those regarding the pornography issue, tend to split women and men regardless of their party, whereas other issues split women and men in some parties but not in others. In a

study on gender differences in U.S. state legislators' policy preferences, **Poggione (2004) found that women expressed significantly more liberal welfare policy preferences than men.** The difference was most profound among Republican legislators.

A variation on measuring attitudes is to research how parliamentarians define their task. Female politicians, to a larger extent than their male colleagues, view the "representation of women's interests" (which has been included in questionnaires) as part of their duty. In a study of the five Nordic countries, Esaiasson (2000, p. 64) analyzes behavioral consequences of such a task definition, and he concludes that "self-defined champions" of women's interests are more inclined than others to contact cabinet ministers on behalf of women. Dodson (2006) reports similar results regarding the U.S. Congress.

Research on attitudes examines what solutions are favored once an issue is on the political agenda. In contrast, research on priorities focuses on an earlier step, asking which issues get onto the political agenda in the first place. Empirical research shows that female members of parliament tend to prioritize issues that are also prioritized by female voters (Diaz 2005, Reingold 2000, Skjeie 1992, Swers 1998, Thomas 1994, Wängnerud 2000a).

Wängnerud's (2006) study of gender differences in priorities among Swedish parliamentarians covers a period of almost 20 years. **The focus is on the number of male and female politicians who mention social policy, family policy, care for the elderly, or health care as a campaign issue or an area of personal interest.** The items included in the study can be seen as a broad way of conceptualizing priorities classified as women's interests, since policies in these areas have a special bearing on the everyday life of women. **The empirical analysis shows that in 1985, 75% of female members of parliament addressed issues of social policy, family policy, care for the elderly, or health care in their election campaigns.** The corresponding figure among male members of parliament was 44% (a difference of 31 percentage points). In that

same year, 52% of female members of parliament stated that issues of social policy, family policy, care for the elderly, or health care were areas of personal interest, compared with 11% of male members of parliament (a difference of 41 percentage points). These noteworthy gender differences hold when the results are controlled for party affiliation and age.

Another important result from this research (Wängnerud 2006) is that, although gender differences are found on the two subsequent survey occasions, 1994 and 2002, the gap has narrowed over time. An additional significant result in the Swedish study is that gender differences were much greater in personal agendas (areas of personal interest) than in campaign agendas. In Swedish politics, the election campaign is centrally controlled to a rather great extent by the parties. When analyzing effects of gender, it is important to note that different political arenas can be exposed to different levels of outside influence.

The results presented here should not be interpreted to mean all women in parliament necessarily promote the same kinds of solutions to social problems. In a study of the Norwegian parliament, Skjeie (1992) analyzes how effects of gender are filtered through party ideology. Her results show that more women than men give priority to issues of “care-and-career politics”—how to successfully combine family life and working life; however, women from right-wing parties tend to support private solutions, whereas women from left-wing parties tend to support state intervention.

Priorities can also be measured in terms of the parliamentarian’s contacts. I referred to the study of Esaiasson (2000), which showed that more female than male members of parliament in the Nordic countries have frequent contacts with cabinet ministers on behalf of women. In addition, a study of the Nordic parliaments found that female politicians have more frequent contacts with women’s organizations outside parliament. Women in Nordic parliaments also cooperate across party lines in order to influence parliamentary decisions related to gender equality to a greater extent than

their male colleagues. It is obvious in studies of the Nordic countries that women in parliaments give the issue of gender equality higher priority than their male colleagues, even though far from all women are “champions” of equality (Wängnerud 2000b; cf. Bergqvist et al. 2000).

I have made some references to empirical research on political behavior; however, most of the research I have reviewed so far has relied on parliamentarians’ responses to questionnaires. Vega & Firestone (1995) have examined legislative voting behavior from 1981 to 1992 in the U.S. Congress, and their results confirm the findings of questionnaire-based research. They conclude that “congressional women display distinctive legislative behavior that portends a greater representation of women and women’s issues” (Vega & Firestone 1995, p. 213). This finding is in line with Celis’s (2006) analysis of speeches from the budget debates of the Belgian Lower House during the period 1900–1979. Female members of the Belgian Parliament were found to be women’s most “fervent” representatives (Celis 2006, p. 85).

Grey (2002) has conducted a study on changes in New Zealand’s parental leave policies. Changes were made in 1975 and 1999, and during this time period, the number of women in the parliament of New Zealand grew from <5% to almost 30%. Grey’s analysis of parliamentary debates preceding the changes shows a somewhat different result than, for example, Celis’s study of the Belgian Lower House: The most obvious division in Grey’s study was along party lines and not along gender lines. Grey (2002) does, however, point to some important changes that have occurred in New Zealand parallel to the increase in the number of women elected. As one example, leave provisions for both parents, rather than mothers alone, have been accepted.

Although there are studies on policy promotion, the closer one gets to outcomes in citizens’ everyday lives, the fewer empirical findings there are to report. In a statistical analysis of child-care coverage in Norwegian municipalities for 1975, 1979, 1983, 1987, and 1991, Bratton & Ray (2002) demonstrate that the

number of women elected has influenced public policy outputs (increased child-care coverage), but the effect of women representatives is not constant; it is most evident in a period of policy innovation. Bratton & Ray (2002) also point out that an important precondition for the translation of descriptive representation to policy outcomes is the existence of gender differences in the mass public and the presence of women in the executive.

The lack of research on outcomes in everyday life for citizens is a problem. Especially unfortunate is the lack of good cross-country comparative research. However, a study by Schwandt-Bayer & Mishler (2005), using data from 31 democracies, serves as a promising example. The starting point is an integrated model of women's representation that takes into account both descriptive and substantive representation. Indicators of substantive representation are weeks of maternity leave, indexes on women's political and social equality, and marital equality in law. The main conclusion is that increased descriptive representation increases legislatures' responsiveness to women's policy concerns and also enhances perceptions of legitimacy among the electorate, but the authors perceive the effects of substantive representation to be smaller than anticipated in theory.

Different international organizations have created gender-equality scales, capturing aspects such as female life expectancy, years of formal schooling for females, ratio of female-to-male earned income, and maternity leave benefits. These indexes have to be evaluated further; however, worldwide comparisons reveal some interesting parallels to the number of women elected. In 2007, Nordic countries topped lists of the most gender-equal countries compiled by the United Nations (Gender-related Development Index), the World Economic Forum (Gender Gap Index), the International Save the Children Alliance (Mothers' Index), and the Social Watch (Gender Equity Index). Nordic countries also top lists that rank countries by the number of women in parliament (Inter-Parliamentary Union website <http://www.ipu.org>).

Outcomes can also be understood in more narrowly defined political terms. Atkeson & Carrillo (2007), having pooled American National Election Studies from 1988 to 1998, confirm that higher numbers of women elected promote higher values of external efficacy for female citizens. The results hold when controlled for factors such as political participation, strength of partisanship, various electoral characteristics, and state political culture. Political efficacy is an indicator of whether the individual perceives the governmental authorities and institutions as responsive to citizen influence (see Cutler 2002).

Before ending this section, I want to say something about results from parliaments outside the sphere of Western democracies. Rwanda, with a parliament of 48.8% women, deserves attention. Interviews with women representatives in the Rwandan parliament indicate that they consider themselves to be more concerned with grassroots politics than their male colleagues are, and also that there has been a strong advocacy of "international feminism" by many female deputies (Devlin & Elgie 2008). However, when Devline & Elgie examine policy outputs, they conclude that the increased women's representation in Rwanda has had little effect.

In summary, a large number of indicators on substantive representation are used in empirical research. They are perhaps not ideal for capturing the effects of the increased number of women elected, but they are reasonable. Longitudinal studies comprise one way of advancing research in this field; however, what I believe is even more urgent is the development of a set of standard definitions and indicators that enable good cross-country comparative research. There is a trade-off here between the contextual approach suggested above, which says that definitions of women's interests and gender equality should be anchored in time and space, and the comparison of a large number of cases. However, even if theoretical definitions should end up a bit flat, I believe that comparisons across countries are a necessary next step. Some indicators suit some contexts better than

other contexts; for example, registering legislative voting behavior makes more sense in research on the U.S. Congress than in research on European parliaments, where parties are more coherent and pressure for loyalty is strong when it comes to voting in the chamber (Lovenduski & Norris 2003). For European countries, it is necessary to use indicators that capture impacts in earlier stages of the parliamentary process.

POLITICS OF PRESENCE OR FEMINIST AWARENESS?

The most interesting challenge to the theory of the politics of presence is currently found in the writings of, among others, Iris Marion Young. **This alternative approach highlights the importance of feminist awareness. Instead of focusing on the common experiences shared by female representatives and female voters (the politics of presence), the feminist awareness approach concentrates on the formulation and implementation of programs explicitly aiming to change society in women-friendly directions.** The theory of feminist awareness does not ascribe importance to female politicians per se, but to **politicians with a feminist agenda** (Young 2000).

There is a tension in the literature on substantive representation that has the potential to sharpen analyses on women in parliaments and make the theory of the politics of presence more precise. It is obvious that not all women in parliaments focus on women's interests and gender equality, and it is also obvious that some men in parliaments are active in this field. However, I sense a risk that instead of cross-fertilization, there will be a split into two separate subfields: one focusing on women as voters and elected representatives, and one focusing on women's movements and "femocrats" in public administration.

During recent decades, governments in most Western democracies have developed a set of agencies to meet the demands of women's movements. Research on state feminism labels these agencies **women's policy agencies (WPAs)**. Lovenduski (2005b, p. 4)

and colleagues suggest that **"WPAs could increase women's access to the state by furthering women's participation in political decision-making and by inserting feminist goals into public policy.** Thus WPAs may enhance the political representation for women." Using similar reasoning, Weldon (2002, p. 1153) states that "women's movements and women's policy agencies may provide more effective avenues of expression for women's perspective than the presence of women in the legislatures." A last example from this strand of research can be drawn from Sawer (2002, p. 17), who argues that increasing the number of women in parliament is "insufficient" to ensure that women are better represented.

Research on institutions and actors outside the parliamentary process can help fill in the picture of mechanisms that drive change in society. However, it has to be remembered that the number of female citizens who are part of the women's movement is limited. It is also important to remember that femocrats, in contrast to female politicians, are seldom tried out in general elections. Although the parliamentary process should not be idealized, elections are an important mechanism to check or correct elites in society (Dahl 1989; Pitkin 1967, pp. 232–43). It would be a mistake for research on substantive representation to sidestep the parliamentary process. From my point of view, a split into separate subfields would be a failure for research on women and substantive representation.

FINAL COMMENTS

The result that emerges from the empirical research is that female politicians contribute to strengthening the position of women's interests. There is a need for more research on women in parliaments, especially regarding substantive representation. The lack of cross-country comparative research has already been highlighted, but there is also a need for other studies, such as case studies exploring causal mechanisms in more detail. The questgoals are to see how, exactly, change takes place and to

explore how the presence of women in parliament might influence the behavior of men. Detailed studies would also be useful to more closely connect research on the causes of the increased number of women elected and research on the effects of that change. There is an interplay between the two steps or levels of the parliamentary process—elections and policy making—but the different sets of theoretical and empirical research on women in parliaments are not always well integrated.

The list of desired studies is rather long. If I were to single out one future development as more important than others, it would be the quest for more cross-country comparative research. Good-quality cross-country comparative empirical research is a sign of a mature research field. And a pending question in research on women in parliaments is whether some parliaments in the world are more open to change than others.

The last theme I want to touch upon is a paradox that can be found between the lines in this essay. Gender differences observed within the parliamentary process—such as gender differences in attitudes, priorities, and policy promotion—can be seen as a vehicle for change, even though segregation between women and men elsewhere in society generally is seen as a mechanism to maintain the prevailing orders of dominance and subordination (see Kimmel 2004).

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I believe it is almost impossible to go from a low proportion of women in parliament to a high proportion without going through a stage wherein visible divisions between female and male politicians appear. However, the fact that women at some phases concentrate on issues such as gender equality and social welfare does not necessarily mean that they should confine themselves to these areas for all time. There is, naturally, a risk that the patterns described in this overview, if maintained over long periods, conserve rather than change prevailing orders of gender and power.

How should gender differences in the parliamentary process be interpreted? A firm answer is impossible. Taking a bird’s-eye view, there are two perspectives on women in parliaments, which can be denoted “static” and “dynamic.” From a static perspective, the pattern that emerges in this essay is interpreted as a division of labor between female and male politicians; when women enter the parliamentary arena, they take over certain areas from men, but nothing becomes fundamentally different as a result. The dynamic interpretation sees the emergence of genuine change. To me, the dynamic perspective is more credible. This judgment does not rely on one or two especially significant studies, but rather on the overall result that emerges when numerous studies covering a wide set of indicators are piled together.

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Errata

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