

Analysing the importance of female political participation politics essay



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Though women have made great strides in the last fifty years, it has been easier to gain rights, or descriptive representation, than to fully implement them. Countries where women are well represented seem to have more pro-women policies, for example, the governments of Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark, have the highest levels of women's representation in Europe, and have shown the effects of that expanded representation through policies that address some of the conflict in female roles between work and child rearing (Stockemer 2007 p477). Ideally, the representation of women in legislatures would reflect their numbers in the population, however, even partial representation can generate gains in government response to the needs of women (Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler, 2005 p424).

Greater representation for women, even when it is far lower than the population ratio can provide an ideal focus group for testing how democratically consolidated a country is (Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler, 2005 p408). All minority groups have identifiable interests and may be underrepresented, but it is much more difficult to compare them systematically because these groups are so varied; a group that is a minority in one country can be a majority in another and absent altogether in a third. Women, however, constitute approximately 50% of the population and live virtually everywhere (Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler, 2005 p408). If the interests of half the population are underrepresented in the legislature, the policies of the state are less likely to represent the interests of women, and result in less legislation that meets their needs. More broadly, the state is less democratically consolidated.

Political Parties and Groups

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The importance of political parties in the democratic sphere seems to revolve around the idea of institutionalized competition, an alternate government in waiting. Conflict between the governing and opposition parties helps democratic consolidation by establishing democratic norms and rules, so a strong presence in political parties may be one route towards substantive representation for women. Institutionalized party competition helps permit the largest possible part of the population to influence major decisions. Conversely, political parties must have an almost permanent base of support among a significant segment of the population if they are to survive, which means that political parties should be motivated to include such a large portion of the population as women. In order to gain greater representation, women must be selected as candidates, and be elected. In most countries, political parties are the primary means by which individuals are selected and supported in their bids for the public office (Lipset 2000).

The ratio of effective parties to all operating parties may influence how many women participate in politics. The higher the ratio, the more likely all parties will be elected to a meaningful number of seats. Parties that typically win a meaningful share of seats may be unwilling to go against the status quo and do things differently than in the past. A high ratio of effective parties indicates a system with mostly comfortable, possibly complacent, parties. In such a situation, the promotion of women as candidates and their support in elections may not be a high priority. In contrast, if the ratio of effective parties to all operating parties is low, it indicates an increased presence of marginal parties that may be more likely to take risks on fielding and supporting women as candidates (Kunovich and Paxton 2005).

The presence of women in elite party positions would also seem to increase the overall number of women fielded as candidates. High percentages of women in party elites may indicate a greater supply of qualified (or perceived to be qualified) women for the parties of a country, membership in such positions may be seen as a stepping stone towards candidacy, and female party elites may use their influence directly to facilitate a greater number of female candidates. (Kunovich and Paxton 2005).

Political groups outside of electoral institutions may be just as effective at pushing for greater representation of women as parties. The Brazilian National Council on Women's Rights between 1986 and 1989 acted as an effective de facto women's lobby and coordinator for the women's movement, holding conferences, seminars and public forums all over Brazil where proposals for constitutional amendments were being formulated that culminated in a Carta to the Women in Constituent Assembly. The Carta included a range of proposals, such as changes in labor legislation, family law, day-care and other improvements in women's rights such as the explicit recognition of equality between men and women. Eighty percent of the demands made in this movement, ranging from the recognition of women's sexual and reproductive rights to 120 days paid maternity leave, were accepted (Waylen 2006).

Ideology or Political Culture

Do ideological compositions of national legislatures influence women's effective representation in those legislatures? Political culture could be described as the embodiment of the attitudes and values of a society, which

define the roles an individual may play in the political process. Cultural and traditional values promoting gender inequality seem to remain a major obstacle to the election of women in more traditional societies because female participation in legislative politics is likely to be discouraged by elite opinion leaders and the public, both of whom want to maintain a male-oriented status quo. However, in more progressive, westernized cultures secular trends towards post-materialist values seem to challenge traditional sex roles and facilitate the entry of more women into power. On the level of political parties, Leftist parties espouse more egalitarian beliefs than right-wing parties and are known for their greater support for gender equality. Parties to the left might also feel the need to be sensitive to groups traditionally excluded from the circles of power (Stockemer 2007). Women tend to vote more liberally than men, but this may be attributed to differences in party identification and regional representation (Hallett 2001). If ideology is a decisive factor, then the percentage of seats held by leftist parties in a country could be an indicator of feminine influence, and this proves to be a highly insignificant. 21 out of 27 states of the EU have left-wing parties with a higher number of female representatives than their right-wing counterparts, but the impact of these findings on the overall representation of women is very limited.

Electorate System

Proportional systems tend to make use of multi-member districts, which means more than one candidate can be elected from a particular district. In contrast, plurality/majority systems like the United States ask citizens to vote for single candidates, typically in single member districts. An electoral <https://assignbuster.com/analysing-the-importance-of-female-political-participation-politics-essay/>

system that uses a proportional representation list system and multi-member districts offers several advantages to female candidates. Since parties operating under proportional representation list systems publish lists of candidates, they may feel pressure to balance their party's ticket across genders, leading to greater numbers of women. Balancing party tickets is used to attract voters but also to achieve equity across different factions of the party and to resolve internal party disputes through compromise (Stockemer 2007).

A women's position in a political party seems to translate into gains for women as candidates only under proportional representation systems (Kunovich and Paxton 2005). Electoral systems with greater proportionality and higher district magnitudes also tend to elect larger percentages of women to legislatures (Schwindt-Bayer 2005). Investigations have consistently shown that women's representation is higher under proportional representation than under a plurality system (Stockemer 2007).

Conclusion

There seems to be general agreement that electoral institutions are an important factor affecting the level of women's representation. Formal representative structures and processes exert powerful influences on the extent of women's descriptive representation, policy responsiveness, and symbolic representation. One important thing to consider is to differentiate the levels of representativeness for measuring the success or failures towards greater female representation. Institutional representativeness does not automatically translate into greater substantive representation for

women, though conversely it seems difficult to have greater substantive representation without institutional reforms. When considering the impact of different electorate systems on women's representation, the realms of political parties and electorate institutions seem to blend together for proportional representation systems, while pluralistic/majoritarian systems have fewer mechanisms to ensure greater female participation.

Annotated Bibliography

Bano, Saira. (2009). "Women in Parliament in Pakistan: Problems and Potential Solutions."

Women's Studies Journal 23, no. 1 (September): 19-35.

In this article, the author focuses on the role of Pakistani women in the political arena, an interesting test case considering widespread belief that Islam is hostile to greater feminist rights. The article also provides good hindsight about the state of women's representation around the globe, what works and what doesn't.

Hallett, Stephanie L. (2001). "Truth and Fiction: A Study of the Gender Gap in the US National Legislature." Politics 21, no. 3 (September).

In this short and simple article, the author attempts to link political ideology with gender, and finds that indeed women are more likely to vote liberal, but that it likely can be attributed to other factors such as party affiliation or regionalism. This article is useful for considering variables besides electoral systems that affect women's representation.

Kunovich, Sheri, and Pamela Paxton. (2005). " Pathways to Power: The Role of Political Parties in Women's National Political Representation." *American Journal of Sociology* 111, no. 2 (September): 505-552.

The authors were interested in theories about how to examine political factors affecting women's political representation over time and investigates how electoral systems, national-level gender quotas and growth of political rights and civil liberties impact women's legislative representation. Found that national quotas do affect women's political presence, but at a

lower level than legislated by law; second, the impact of a proportional representation

system on women's political representation is steady over time; and third, civil liberties, do not affect the level of women's political representation in the earliest period of democracy formation, but do influence the growth of women's political representation over time.

Lipset, Seymour Martin. (2000). " The Indispensability of Political Parties." *Journal of Democracy* 11, no. 1 (January): 48.

This article helped me consider political parties by themselves as factors affecting women's representation. The article also helped provide a working definition of democracy and the factors that determine the makeup and strength of political parties in the framework of democratic government, Important for considering electorate systems and women's representation in the larger framework of society.

Schedler, Andreas. (1998). "What is Democratic Consolidation?" *Journal of Democracy* 9, no. 2 (April): 91.

The article helped provide an expanded definition of democratic consolidation to include familiar democratic values and helps shape the argument that greater representation of women means greater democratic consolidation. The article is also useful for pointing out how flexible and relative our definitions of words like democracy are in the grand scheme of things.

Schwindt-Bayer, Leslie A., and William Mishler. (2005). "An Integrated Model of Women's

Representation." *Journal of Politics* 67, no. 2 (May): 407-428.

This article examines the many dimensions of what it means to be represented. The authors point out the difference between symbolic, institutional, and substantive representation. The article relies on evidence that refutes any directional correlations between the different states of representation.

Stockemer, Daniel. (2007). "Why are there Differences in the Political Representation of Women in the 27 Countries of the European Union?" *Perspectives on European Politics & Society* 8, no. 4 (December 15): 476-493.

An interesting analysis of what influences women's representation in the EU.

Some of the factors considered include electoral system, quotas, economic

affluence, and political culture. This study may be more relevant than others
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because it considered only EU countries, which helps cut down on extraneous variables. This article also helped provide perspective about what it means to be represented and the state of women's representation today.

Waylen, Georgina. (2006). "Constitutional Engineering: What Opportunities for the Enhancement of Gender Rights?" *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 7 (October): 1209-1221.

This article examines the function of a constitution in regards to expanding women's representation. It finds that constitutions, and other mechanisms like gender quotas, definitely help expand the representation of women, but by no means ensure it. This article also points out that framing the usefulness of these mechanisms are important today because of efforts to 'build democracy after war' in places like Afghanistan and Iraq.