

**Women, Gender, and Political Representation:
Towards a Comparative Research Agenda**

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Women, Gender, and Political Representation: Notes for a Comparative Research Agenda

A central focus of research on women, gender, and politics has been issues of political representation. In seeking to understand the relationship between ‘gender’ and ‘politics,’ scholars have asked questions like: Why are there so few women elected to political office? Do women in parliament represent ‘women’ as a group? How do increased numbers of women in politics affect the perceptions of female voters? The goal of this work has thus been to explore women’s access to positions of political power, as well as the meanings and implications of their presence – or absence – for women more broadly. These insights have been crucial for mapping the degree to which women and women’s concerns have been integrated into formal political processes in countries around the world. All the same, coverage of these issues has been uneven in at least three respects. First, although scholars recognize multiple dimensions of political representation (cf. Pitkin 1967), most empirical research tends to focus on one aspect of representation to the exclusion of others (but see Childs 2004; Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005). Second, although there is a wealth of quantitative and qualitative work on these various facets of representation, few studies reflect explicitly on the comparative aspects of their insights (but see Matland 1998; Yoon 2004). Third, although feminists recognize the importance of shifting the analysis from ‘women’ to ‘gender’ (cf. Childs and Krook 2006; Randall 2002), many scholars retain a focus on ‘women’ in their research designs. Thus, despite a substantial literature, many questions remain to be asked in relation to the gendered and comparative nature of these findings.

The aim of this essay is to expand the frame of reference in order to sketch the contours of a more comprehensive research agenda on women, gender, and political representation. The potential of this schema requires (1) rethinking the role of comparison by adopting a more nuanced approach

to 'cases,' and (2) making more explicit efforts to integrate 'gender' by going beyond an exclusive focus on women. With regard to the former, most work in comparative politics draws a distinction between quantitative statistical analyses and qualitative case studies. Differences in these approaches are usually framed as a contrast between the numbers of cases analyzed, understood most often as the number of countries included in the study: quantitative scholars incorporate many countries in order to generate insights into broad empirical patterns, while qualitative researchers examine a few countries in order to gain more information about deeper causal processes. Mainstream scholars offer two possible research strategies for moving beyond this simple equation between cases and countries, and thus expand the scope of what might be understood as 'comparative politics.' The first recommends opening the definition of 'case' to include sub-country units and events, on the grounds that doing so increases the sample size and thus improves the potential for making valid causal inferences (George and Bennett 2005; King, Keohane, and Verba 1994). The second entails connecting the intensive study of a single unit to patterns generated from the investigation of other similar units, in an effort to determine what it is a 'case of' (Gerring 2004; Ragin and Becker 1992). Employed in a conscious fashion, both of these approaches present an opportunity to accumulate more systematic insights on a wide range of political phenomena, including political representation, by generating more data and linking disparate studies in ways that better foster cumulative research.

The concept of 'gender,' in turn, has been the central theoretical contribution of feminist research, in both political science and other disciplines (Hawkeworth 2006). Although scholars differ among themselves with regard to the nature of 'gender' and its relation to 'sex,' most agree that both categories have long been overlooked in mainstream work. In political science, the incorporation of 'sex' and 'gender' has proceeded roughly in three stages. The first highlighted women's exclusion from politics, while the second 'added' and 'stirred' women into existing political frameworks. In contrast, the third and current stage raises more fundamental questions about political science

methods and approaches, narrow definitions of ‘politics,’ and the gendered nature of political institutions and processes (Lovenduski 1998; Randall 2002). Although these changes in perspective have been implemented to varying degrees, a shift in focus from ‘sex’ to ‘gender’ has two broad implications for political research: (1) it moves the analytical focus away from biological sex, which treats men and women as binary opposites, to constructed gender identities, which view masculinity and femininity as features that exist along a continuum, often in combination with other identities, and (2) it replaces exclusive concern with women in politics and public policy with careful attention to the impact of masculinities and femininities, as well as relations between men and women, on political inputs and outcomes. Given women’s ongoing exclusion from the political sphere, focusing on ‘women’ continues to remain crucial for mapping patterns of political access, behaviors, and effects. However, advances in theorizing ‘gender’ as an analytic category offer a chance to delve more deeply into these dynamics by exploring masculinities and femininities, as well as the relative status of men and women, in the conduct of political life.

To take the first steps towards a broader research agenda, this essay considers how feminist political scientists might analyze various facets of representation by incorporating various strategies of comparison, as well as broader lens on ‘gender.’ Addressing dimensions of representation in turn, it surveys the state of research on women and gender in relation to descriptive representation, or the characteristics of individuals elected to political office; substantive representation, or the articulation of policy concerns by specific office-holders; and symbolic representation, or the broader meanings and effects that the presence of different kinds of elected officials have for the public at large. In each category, special attention is paid to the achievements and limits of these research findings, in terms of both cross-case comparisons and inclusion of ‘gender’ as an analytic concept. Each section concludes with some suggested directions for future research, based on gaps in collective knowledge stemming from the lack of a comparative and gendered lens. The goal is to explore how a particular

combination of mainstream and feminist tools may help foster the development of a more explicit ‘comparative politics of gender,’ at least as applied to the topic of political representation.

Women, Gender, and Descriptive Representation

To the extent that there has been comparative research on women, gender, and political representation, it has focused on the descriptive representation of women. This stems from the fact that it is relatively easy to count the numbers of women in national legislatures and then to compare these percentages across countries. Moreover, this task is facilitated by the work of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, an intergovernmental organization based in Geneva, that collects and posts updated information on more than 180 countries worldwide (see Inter-Parliamentary Union 2007a; Inter-Parliamentary Union 2007b). Until recently, a great deal of statistical and case study work generated largely consistent findings in terms of the factors explaining why some countries elected greater numbers of women to parliament than others. However, this consensus has been increasingly challenged by new case evidence, stemming from dramatic shifts in patterns of female representation around the globe. Further, the tendency to focus only on women in parliaments has prevented the formulation of other research questions that might better inform how scholars understand variations in women’s access to political office.

Employing quantitative methods, scholars have found that the proportion of women in national parliaments tends to be higher in countries with proportional representation (PR) electoral systems, as opposed to countries with majoritarian electoral arrangements (Caul 1999; McAllister and Studlar 2002; Salmond 2006). This is because these systems often have higher district magnitudes, which open the way for women to be included as the total number of members elected per district increases (Engstrom 1987; Welch and Studlar 1990), and closed party lists, which enable parties to place women in electable positions on party slates (Caul 1999; Siaroff 2000). Recent work

also points to the importance of PR in facilitating the effective implementation of gender quota policies aimed at increasing the number of female candidates (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2006; Tripp and Kang forthcoming; Yoon 2004). A wide range of studies also observe strong correlations with women's overall rates of education and labor force participation (McDonagh 2002; Rosenbluth, Salmond, and Thies 2006), as well as levels of national socioeconomic development (Matland 1998; Reynolds 1999), whose effects they attribute to modernization processes that enable women to move into higher social and economic roles that lead to greater influence in politics (Inglehart and Norris 2003; Rule 1987). Lastly, they discover close connections with cultural attitudes towards equality, noting that the number of women in politics is typically higher in Protestant countries (Kaiser 2001; Reynolds 1999; Siaroff 2000) and in countries where citizens are more open to women in leadership positions (Inglehart and Norris 2003; Paxton and Kunovich 2003).

A closer look at the actual range of countries examined in this literature, however, suggests that these findings are more likely to be specific to the countries included in particular datasets. First, these results derive almost exclusively from studies of advanced Western democracies (Krook 2005). While some research confirms these findings in non-Western cases (Paxton 1997; Yoon 2004), other work discovers that these same factors appear to play little or no role in developing countries (Matland 1998; Oakes and Almquist 1993) or in advanced non-Western countries (Hickman 1997). Second, most of these studies gauge the causal impact of variables at single moments in time, setting aside the possibility that temporal context may be crucial for causal explanation. For example, most work identifies the electoral system as one of – if not the most – important factors explaining cross-national variations. Before 1970, however, women's descriptive representation was roughly the same in PR and majoritarian systems (Kaiser 2001), with differences emerging only after women inside parties began mobilizing for change (Kittilson 2006). Third, the 'universal' formulas presented

in this research – phrased in counterfactual terms – are undermined by a wealth of counter-evidence. To use the same example, most countries with high levels of female representation do have some form of PR electoral arrangement. But, not all states with PR have large numbers of women in politics (McAllister and Studlar 2002). Further, some countries with majoritarian systems have witnessed dramatic increases in recent years, including in the single-member district aspect of mixed electoral systems (Mackay, Myers, and Brown 2003; Moser 2003).

Qualitative research on individual cases goes far in explaining these patterns, which appear puzzling when viewed only at the aggregate level. Tracing events over time, these studies explore the impact of the electoral system by observing how it influences women's strategies, as well as elite reactions, concerning the nomination of more female candidates. Although many still find that PR provides greater opportunities for women (Kolinsky 1991; Matland 1995), some note that women's descriptive representation has increased in some cases without a change in the electoral system (Sainsbury 1993), while it has remained relatively stable in others even as the electoral system has undergone reform (Beckwith 1992). They point out that low district magnitudes and open party lists do not always block access to women, but instead create various – often unforeseen – opportunities for women in certain circumstances to run for and win elected office (Haavio-Mannila 1979; Schmidt and Saunders 2004). In terms of women's education and labor force participation, some case studies corroborate the findings of statistical analyses by noting how the practices of sex segregation channel women into female-dominated, low-paying occupations, which prevent them from achieving the higher socioeconomic standing associated with the eligibility pool for elective office (Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1994). Other work reveals, however, that social and economic developments may evolve separately from changes in the political arena (Krook 2005), as many developed countries continue to see low numbers of women in parliament (Kuusipalo 1999), at the same time that some developing countries have witnessed dramatic increases in recent years (Bruhn

2003; Goetz and Hassim 2003). Finally, while a few case studies verify that egalitarian political cultures favor women's descriptive representation (Bystydzienski 1995), others observe that women can assume prominent political positions in countries with strongly patriarchal religious and cultural norms. In these instances, they find, women typically accede to political office as a result of family connections or as a form of political patronage by powerful male leaders (Katzenstein 1978).

The existing literature on women, gender, and descriptive representation has thus centered largely on the related questions of (1) why women in all countries are under-represented in national parliaments and (2) what might explain cross-national variations in women's access to political office. This manner of phrasing, while crucial for building up the study of women and descriptive representation, has nonetheless served to limit the degree of comparative and gendered research on this particular facet of political representation. In terms of 'cases,' most work to date has focused exclusively on national level parliaments. While this is partly due to the greater availability of national-level data, this focus has come at the expense of efforts to explore what variations in women's representation at the local, regional, and supranational levels might indicate about reasons behind women's exclusion from various kinds of elected office. The few studies that do address these other levels of election reveal that some similar, but also some distinct, factors appear to explain why women are able to win office at the sub- and supra-state levels (Norris and Franklin 1997; Vengroff, Nyiri, and Fugiero 2003; Welch and Studlar 1990). Along parallel lines, scholars have largely overlooked the potential of examining multiple elections in the same country over time. The small number who expand the number of cases in this way present several novel insights with regard to the positive effects of some changes (Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2005; Jones 2004), and the negative effects of others (Beckwith 1992). This type of research design has many advantages, the most obvious being the possibility to isolate the relative role of various factors over time. All the same, scholars must remain attentive to the possibility of 'stretching' the concept of 'case' too far:

the growing contradictions across research findings based on different samples of countries suggest that analysts should consider carefully the bounds of the cases that can justifiably be compared.

Moving on to the issue of ‘gender,’ almost all studies focus exclusively on women. The implicit assumption, as many feminist scholars have pointed out in other areas, is that men are treated as the norm, while women are viewed as the deviant group to be explained. For this reason, examining men and women together – rather than simply women on their own – might offer some interesting new insights into the characteristics that shape access to elected office. For example, many researchers explore the relationship between the number of women in parliaments and women’s overall levels of education and types of workforce participation (i.e., their presence in certain types of professions) (see for example Rosenbluth et al 2006; Rule 1987). However, they do not collect the same data on men, presumably because they assume that men – as well as men in parliament – are more likely to be highly educated and occupy prestigious professional positions. This belief is contradicted in studies on the professionalization of legislatures, which note that some parliaments previously contained a much higher proportion of working-class members and activists from grassroots organizations that they do at the present (Britton 2005; Eliassen and Pedersen 1978). In a similar way, a great deal of research on women in politics in the developing world highlights that most women who achieve political office in these countries tend to have family ties to prominent male politicians (Nanivadekar 2006). Yet, men in these countries also tend to come from political families. This suggests that the men and women who win election may resemble one another more than do the electorate (cf. Norris 1997), making comparisons with women’s general status a less than fruitful approach. Further, including men in the analysis might enable a more nuanced understanding of reasons for changes in women’s under-representation by acknowledging their related effects on patterns of men’s over-representation. Although few scholars have conceptualized their research in these terms (one exception being Ohlander 2001), such an approach

not only calls attention to the stakes generated by the zero-sum nature of these developments – namely, that the election of more women typically requires the election of fewer men¹ – but also enables a closer look into their implications for links between masculinity and politics through efforts to ‘feminize’ political life. Thus, while research on descriptive representation is relatively well-developed within the comparative literature on women and politics, there are still many issues left to explore for scholars interested in determining why fewer women than men are elected to political office.

Women, Gender, and Substantive Representation²

Comparative studies on women, gender, and substantive representation, in contrast, are much rarer, despite a growing interest in this topic in recent years. Most research on this facet of representation involves analyzing women’s priorities or behavior in legislative arenas in individual countries to determine whether or not women ‘make a difference’ when they occupy political office. That most of these studies focus on single countries is not surprising: monitoring the effects of women’s presence requires intimate knowledge of the dynamics behind policy-making processes, in order to gauge how women might be able to intervene – and whether or not they do – to promote women’s concerns in the formulation of public policies. Although many of these investigations are implicitly comparative – examining multiple states, policies, years, and parts of the policy-making process – most do not frame their findings in comparative terms, but rather as elements in a single larger dataset. In some instances, scholars point to the conclusions drawn in studies of other countries to frame their research findings, but generally do not reflect on how appropriate these comparisons might be, given important differences in political context. Expanding comparisons to

¹ In some countries, conflicts of this nature have been avoided to a certain degree by increasing the number of seats available overall, to avoid ‘kicking men out’ in order to ‘let women in’ (Krook 2005; cf. Baldez 2006).

² Some of the interpretations of the literature in this section draw heavily on my work with Sarah Childs, especially Childs and Krook (2006).

include more countries, as well as to move beyond exclusive attention to female legislative behavior, presents an opportunity to explore how gendered identities and interests are articulated and advanced in a variety of political spheres.

The existing literature on this topic seeks to understand the degree to which women seek – and are able – to promote women’s issues once they are elected to political office. Although scholars often detect distinct policy priorities among male and female legislators (Barrett 1995; Taylor-Robinson and Heath 2003; Thomas 1991), they also find that these differences do not always translate into policy gains for women as a group. Some argue that this stems from the fact that women constitute only a small minority among elected officials. They anticipate that as women’s numbers increase past a ‘critical mass,’ attention to women’s policy concerns will grow (cf. Beckwith 2007; Childs and Krook 2006). The rationale is that as women become more numerous in legislative chambers, they will be increasingly able to form strategic coalitions with one another in order to promote legislation related to women’s interests (Saint-Germain 1989; Thomas 1994). However, other scholars outline at least four other scenarios to explain what might occur as greater numbers of women are elected to political office: a rise in the number of women may influence men’s behavior in a feminist direction, causing both male and female legislators to pay more attention to women’s issues (Bratton 2005; Flammang 1985); the increased presence of women may provoke a backlash among male legislators, who may employ a range of tactics to obstruct women’s policy initiatives and keep them outside positions of power (Hawkesworth 2003; Heath, Schwindt-Bayer, and Taylor-Robinson 2005); a lower proportion of women may be more effective than a higher number because female legislators may be able to specialize in women’s concerns without appearing to undermine male domination (Crowley 2004; Dodson and Carroll 1991); and a rise in the overall number of women may result in the election of an increasingly more diverse group who may or may not be interested in pursuing women’s issues, either because their priorities lie elsewhere or because

they believe that other female legislators will continue to lobby on behalf of women (Carroll 2001; Schwandt-Bayer 2006).

To explain these patterns, scholars identify a multiplicity of factors that limit and enhance opportunities for women to translate policy preferences into legislative initiatives on behalf of women as a group. Much of this research focuses on institutional rules and norms that reflect a bias towards men's experiences and authority (Hawkesworth 2003; Kathleen 1995), and as such, compel women to conform to existing masculine legislative practices in ways that undermine their ability to integrate women's perspectives into public policy-making (Carroll 2001). Many also note the impact of party affiliation and ideology on women's legislative activities, observing that mechanisms of candidate selection, combined with pressures for party discipline, determine what kinds of women are elected, as well as the specific policy positions that they are likely to take once they acceded to political office (Cowley and Childs 2003; Gotell and Brotell 1991). Others, however, draw attention to institutional norms that facilitate women's participation (Chaney 2006), including the presence of women's caucuses and women's policy machineries (Thomas 1991; Weldon 2002), and point out that some party ideologies offer greater opportunities for women to pursue feminist policy concerns (Reingold 2000; Swers 2002).

Nonetheless, as other scholars point out, the possibility to achieve gains for women depends closely on features of the policy-making process, which influence how and when women's issues reach the legislative agenda, as well as their ultimate prospects for being passed into law. Most research focuses on stable features, finding that women as a group have the greatest impact – or, more specifically, tend to differ most from men – in terms of setting the legislative agenda and proposing new bills that address issues of concern to women (Childs 2004; Swers 2004). For this reason, many criticize studies that focus exclusively on legislative voting, because these assume that enactment is the most important stage of the policy-making process (Tamerius 1995). While some

suggest that the best solution is to examine the entire legislative process (Carroll 2001; Swers 2002), others point out that policy-making often involves numerous elements of contingency that make such models appear overly simplistic. On the one hand, complex combinations of actors – often in series of chance events – are generally responsible for moving an issue to agenda prominence and gaining its passage (Childs and Withey 2006; cf. Kingdon 1984). On the other hand, policy innovations rarely proceed in a vacuum, because policy cycles and demonstration effects strongly condition which issues enter and are kept off of legislative agendas (Bratton and Ray 2002).

Although most of these studies are framed in general terms, a closer look reveals that most of their findings are based on the intensive study of a single country case – in most instances, the United States. All the same, most scholars design their research in order to maximize the number of observations by analyzing multiple states (Reingold 2000; Thomas 1994), elections (Childs 2004; Swers 2002), and policy areas (Celis 2006; Carroll 2001). For many, however, this strategy is adopted mainly in order to increase the number of data points, not necessarily to explore what a comparison of cases – viewed as wholes – might reveal more generally about efforts to promote women’s interests in politics. A second possible means to increase the number of cases might be to expand what is understood as the ‘site’ of political representation. As various scholars point out, women’s issues are often pursued and debated at different and often interacting levels of government, namely supranational, national, regional, and local political assemblies (Banaszak et al 2003; Ferree and Tripp 2006). They also appear in a variety of political forums, like legislatures, cabinets, non-governmental organizations, women’s policy agencies, civil society, courts, constitutions, and political parties (Celis, Childs, Kantola, and Krook forthcoming; Chappell 2002). While women in these various sites may work together to promote women’s policy concerns (Lovenduski 2005; Nijeholt, Vargas, Wieringa 1998), they may also substitute for (Weldon 2002) or compete with one another (Haas 2004) to articulate their own visions of ‘women-friendly’ public policy. Exploring

these possibilities may generate many new insights into what the substantive representation of women might mean in a variety of different case contexts.

As for incorporating ‘gender,’ existing research on substantive representation is more sensitive to differences among women, as well as between women and men, than work on descriptive representation. While many political theorists aim to discern or define a shared perspective among women as a group in order to justify calls for their increased presence, most empirical studies stress divisions among women – like race, class, age, and party affiliation – that prevent the formation of a collective female legislative agenda (Dodson and Carroll 1991; Swers 2002). Indeed, some argue that identity categories like ‘women’ are inherently exclusionary and serve to reify one difference while erasing and obscuring others (Carroll 2001). To them, ‘gender’ is not a fixed identity that women bring with them when they enter politics, but one that is partially produced and reproduced within the context of particular legislatures (Towns 2003; Whip 1991). Others question the elision of women’s bodies with feminist minds, on the grounds that being female may matter less than ‘gender consciousness’ does for achieving feminist outcomes (Childs 2004; Reingold 2000).

These variations and ambiguities are reflected further in competing definitions of ‘women’s issues.’ Scholars adopt various approaches that include policies that increase the autonomy and well-being of women (Bratton 2005; Wangnerud 2000); concerns that belong to the private sphere according to established views on gender relations (Meyer 2003); areas where surveys discover a gender gap in the population (Schwindt-Bayer 2006); and any issues of concern to the broader society (Dolan and Ford 1995). As such, some prefer feminist definitions that focus on role change for women through increases in autonomy and the scope for personal choice (Dodson and Carroll 1991; Reingold 2000), while others opt for more inclusive ones that capture a broader range of issues affecting women’s everyday lives (Swers 2002). Yet others favor definitions based on the

concerns articulated by women's movements at various moments in time, which allow women's issues to remain a priori undefined, context-related, and subject to evolution (Celis 2006), as well as a collective product that emerges as women interact with other women to identify their priorities (Weldon 2002). Despite these nuanced arguments, however, very few explore how men may articulate women's concerns – or, indeed, what men perceive these issues to be – or, alternatively, how men might represent men's concerns in political life. These issues, in turn, raise questions about the enactment of masculinities and femininities in the political sphere (cf. Bird 2005), to the extent that men and women are seen as conforming or breaking with established gender roles through their policy priorities and behavior in multiple policy-making arenas. The existing research on substantive representation is therefore quite advanced as regards questions of 'gender,' but could go further in incorporating men, along with constructions of masculinity and femininity into the analysis. One means of doing this in a less essentialist manner would be to employ comparisons of multiple cases – even simply using individuals as 'cases' – to explore the representative claims that are articulated (cf. Saward 2006) and the actions that are taken in the name of representing particular groups.

Women, Gender, and Symbolic Representation³

In contrast to descriptive and substantive representation, comparative research on women, gender, and symbolic representation is virtually non-existent. This is due in part to the fact that scholars disagree in their definitions of 'symbolic representation.' Some treat it as synonymous with descriptive representation, as 'standing for' something that is not present (Carroll 2002; cf. Baker 2006; Pitkin 1967). Two other definitions, however, are more common. The first views symbolic representation in terms of what women's presence reveals about the legitimacy of the legislature as a whole (Burrell 1998; Childs 2004; Lawless 2004; Reingold 2000), finding that both men and women

³ Many thanks to Lydia Anderson-Dana for her help in researching and discussing the literature discussed in this section.

respond positively to increased numbers of women (Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005). The second frames it in relation to the effects that women's presence has on the perceptions of voters in terms of the nature of politics as a 'male' domain (Burns, Scholzman, and Verba 2001; Childs 2004; High-Pippert and Comer 1998; Sapiro 1981). Viewed more broadly, these two definitions refer to the cultural meanings and ramifications that stem from the representative process, related to public views regarding women in politics and the perceived efficacy of female voters due to the absence or presence of elected officials who are female. Developing a body of comparative research requires establishing which aspect of symbolic representation is being investigated and then exploring these dynamics in relation to a broader range of cases, with an eye to discerning the ways – as well as the conditions under which – the composition of legislatures has an impact on citizen evaluations. Along similar lines, a gendered lens has enormous potential to inform theories about the nature of symbolic representation, but this promise is thus far implicit – and largely under-developed – in existing research.

Viewed as a whole, current studies offer mixed results with regard to the symbolic role or importance of female legislators. For example, some scholars find that male and female respondents believe that government is more democratic when more women are present (Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005). In contrast, others report that while women represented by women were generally more positive about their representatives, this did not lead them to be more positive about politics in general (Lawless 2004). Similarly, many authors document shifts in the attitudes of constituents following the election of more women to political office, arguing that the inclusion of women sends important signals to female citizens that politics is a domain open to all (Burns, Scholzman, and Verba 2001), leading many to become more politically involved, or at least, to feel more politically efficacious (Atkeson 2003; Childs 2004; High-Pippert and Comer 1998). Others find, however, that the increased presence of women appears to have little or no impact on the political engagement of

female constituents (Zetterberg 2006). Some of these findings are based on interviews with female legislators, who are asked what they think is the symbolic significance of their presence for their constituents (Carroll 2002; Childs 2004; Schroedel and Mazumdar 1998). Others emerge from large-scale surveys that compare male and female attitudes – and sometimes behaviors – in relation to the women elected to political office (Lawless 2004; Reingold 2000; Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005; Zetterberg 2006).

With some notable exceptions, most of this research focuses on developments within a single country, most often the United States. However, many of the research designs employed can be considered comparative in at least two senses: they often explore the attitudes and behaviors of many respondents, who can each be treated as a ‘case,’ and they occasionally address differences between women and men, who as separate groups might also each be viewed as a ‘case.’ Yet, the greatest leverage for parsing out these causal effects is likely to come from cross-national research, which permits a greater range of variation in the contextual conditions that might shape how voters and elected officials perceive these symbolic effects, related to – for example – political histories, electoral and political party systems, levels of development, women’s social and economic status, and broader political cultures. In contrast, literature on symbolic representation has gone further than research on descriptive and substantive representation to integrate men and women into the analysis. Nonetheless, much less work has explored how gender norms might affect evaluations of female candidates, as well as perceptions of male and female voters, given prevailing ideas about femininity and masculinity in relation to ‘politics as usual.’ More specifically, it is possible that male and female voters feel that legislatures are more legitimate when there are more women because they believe that greater gender balance is a more just arrangement. However, it is also possible that the presence of more women leads to more positive evaluations because voters feel that women are less corrupt or more attuned to the needs of others, thus drawing more on stereotyped notions of the

‘feminine’ rather than more ‘objective’ criteria of candidate quality. Similarly, focusing exclusively on differences between male and female voters may also obscure how gender norms shape perceptions themselves. A wide range of studies, for example, finds that women tend to have – or at least report – less political knowledge than men (Sanbonmatsu 2003). This may lead both men and women to misestimate the number of women in political office, albeit in different directions, causing them to base their opinions on distinct types of data. Analyzing these dimensions with a more nuanced gendered lens is thus likely to offer quite different – or at least a greater range of – information about various kinds of symbolic effects.

Towards a Comparative Research Agenda

One of the most extensive literatures on women, gender, and politics is organized around questions of political representation. Using quantitative and qualitative tools, scholars have sought to explain variations in women’s access to positions of political power, as well as to explore what the absence or presence of women from elected politics might ‘mean’ for democratic processes, as well as for women as a group. Viewed as a whole, however, this research is truncated in three respects: it tends to address single aspects of representation, generalize on the basis of evidence from restricted samples, and focus exclusively on women. As such, despite an enormous literature, many questions remain to be asked with regard to the comparative and gendered nature of these insights. This essay sketches some directions for future research based on expanding what is thought of as a ‘case’ and what is meant by the term ‘gender.’ Many political scientists equate cases with countries, which limits the degree of comparative research, given the finite number of country case units. However, if cases are conceived more broadly, it is possible to engage in comparisons that encompass various kinds of sub-national entities, including regions, municipalities, groups, and individuals, as well as units over time, including years, elections, and parts of policy-making processes. These concerns intersect, but

do not entirely overlap, with efforts to incorporate gender, in the sense that attention to both men and women – both as groups and as individuals – can also increase the number of cases considered in relation to a particular research question. However, integrating gender as an analytic category may involve not just including men, but also exploring the role of norms of femininity and masculinity – and, indeed, the possibility of multiple femininities and masculinities – in shaping access, behavior, and effects of men’s and women’s presence in political office. Thus, despite a rich and varied body of work on women, gender, and political representation, many questions still remain to be explored. A promising means for pushing research in new directions is to combine comparative and feminist insights in ways that foster the emergence of a more explicit comparative politics of gender, in order to produce new knowledge attentive to the gendered – but also bounded – nature of the dynamics observed in particular contexts around the world.

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Efforts to improve female representation in politics have often focused on quotas and reserved shares. What is really needed is a nuanced approach that tackles the underlying, interconnected barriers that women face in getting nominated for elected office and conducting successful campaigns. In seven of the top ten countries for female representation, political parties have voluntarily implemented their own rules on the matter. Globally, over 100 political parties in 53 countries have voluntary measures in place to increase the number of women candidates and party officials. In Georgia, for example, political parties that include at least 30% of each gender on their electoral lists receive a 30% supplement from the state budget. Copyright © The Women and Politics Research Section of the American Political Science Association 2011. Access options. Get access to the full version of this content by using one of the access options below. Comparison and Integration: A Path toward a Comparative Politics of Gender. Perspectives on Politics 8 (1): 177-82. CrossRef Google Scholar. Tripp, Aili Mari. Individual representation: a different approach to political representation. Representation, Vol. 48, Issue. 1, p. 115. CrossRef. Research has attributed this wide spectrum to political, socioeconomic, and cultural or ideological factors. After testing these existing theories on a sample of... While culture and ideology undoubtedly have an impact on women's representation in certain countries, it is unlikely that it can provide a universal explanation for the differences among countries. Some countries with cultures and ideologies that would seem to support greater gender inclusive in politics still lag behind in terms of female representation. Research in this school seems to focus on national attitudes towards gender equality as the reason behind the level of female participation in national legislatures.