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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER AND POLITICS

The Meaning and Measurement of Women's Interests

Introduction

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Philosophers and activists have long advocated that women need to be included in government, not just for the many benefits of descriptive and symbolic representation, but also because increased descriptive representation of women is expected to produce enhanced substantive representation of women. Yet "substantively representing" women requires determining the interests that women have that need to be represented. This has proven to be a difficult and contentious proposition, even though much has been learned from the work that has attempted to employ categorizations of women's interests. Are there interests that apply to all women around the globe? Are there women's interests that vary for different types of women: rich versus poor, by ethnicity or religion, across space and time? What are the differences among "interests," "issues," and "preferences?" Do we even need a concept of "women's interests"? If so, then how can we best measure those interests?

For years, gender and politics scholars have debated the meaning, measurement, and necessity of the concept of women's interests. The most recent of these debates occurred at a roundtable at the 2010 Midwest Political Science Association Annual Meeting. Early on the last morning of the conference, a large and lively crowd turned out to discuss "The Meaning and Measurement of Women's Interests," with a distinguished group of panelists representing a diverse array of perspectives. The roundtable was so successful that the panelists decided to turn their comments into essays and submit them as a symposium for the Critical Perspectives section of *Politics & Gender*. Five essays by these panelists follow.

In the first essay, Lisa Baldez tackles the question of how women's interests can be measured. If we want to assume that women have a set

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of interests that can be exogenously defined and used to assess whether women represent women empirically, then how can we best measure them? She offers the novel suggestion that scholars use the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to develop a clear conceptualization of women's interests. Karen Beckwith argues that scholars need to distinguish women's interests from their issues and preferences. Doing so avoids problems of essentialism and allows us to see women's interests as reflecting their life experiences and as sources of mobilization and self-empowerment. Beth Reingold and Michele Swers question whether women's interests can be exogenously determined and, instead, argue that they are endogenously constructed. Viewing interests this way allows them to vary across a wide variety of contexts and over time, and it yields a set of new and interesting questions about the motivations of women in political office. Wendy Smooth reminds us that women are not a homogenous group with a uniform set of interests (whether exogenously or endogenously construed) but are, instead, a diverse set of individuals motivated by a wide range of intersecting identities. Finally, Laurel Weldon shuns the concept of women's interests in favor of a new theory of "social perspective," highlighting the diversity among women's identities and the normatively constructed political contexts in which women in office function.

Women's representation in government is increasing substantially in countries worldwide. As a result, it is imperative to sort out the complicated questions of whether women have distinct interests, what those interests are, and how we should best measure them in order to assess the full impact of women's representation. The essays in this Critical Perspectives section by no means offer a final resolution of this debate. But we do hope that they serve to propel the discussion forward and closer to that endpoint. We thank these excellent scholars who not only produced thought provoking talks for the roundtable at the Midwest Annual Meeting, but who have gone further by writing these stimulating essays that will move forward both research and teaching about women and their impact on politics.

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