Studying Political Representation: A Comparative-Gendered Approach

Mona Lena Krook

How does a comparative politics of gender improve our understanding of political representation? I map the existing feminist literature on this topic, which asks questions like why there are so few women elected to political office, whether women in politics represent women as a group, and how the presence or absence of women in politics affects voter perceptions and opinions. I then consider how scholars—both feminist and non-feminist—might generate new insights on political representation by expanding what is thought of as a "case" and what is meant by the term "gender." I recommend increasing the scope of comparison by (1) opening up the definition of a case to include a broader range of units and events and (2) connecting the study of a single unit to patterns generated by the study of other similar units. I suggest moving away from equating women with gender by exploring (1) relations between women and men and (2) the impact of masculinities and femininities on the conduct of political life. While developed in relation to research on representation, this approach offers broader advice for capturing the diverse and gendered nature of political dynamics observed around the world.

How does a comparative politics of gender improve our understanding of political representation? Existing feminist research on this topic explores issues like why there are so few women elected to political office, whether women in politics represent women as a group, and how the presence or absence of women in politics affects voter perceptions and opinions. I map the findings of this literature and then consider how scholars—both feminist and non-feminist—might generate new insights on political representation by integrating (1) additional strategies of comparison and (2) a broader notion of gender. In terms of comparison, most work in political science draws a distinction between quantitative statistical analyses and qualitative case studies. This distinction is framed in most instances as the number of countries analyzed in the research. Recent contributions, however, present two possible strategies for expanding the scope of comparison: (1) opening the definition of a "case" to include sub-country units and events,[1] and (2) connecting the intensive study of a single unit to patterns generated from the investigation of other similar units.[2] Both approaches present opportunities to generate more data and link disparate studies in ways that better foster cumulative research.

The concept of gender, in turn, has been the central theoretical contribution of feminist theorizing, in both political science and other disciplines.[3] 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. In light of 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, theories of gender 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.

With these innovations in mind, I address the state of research on women and gender in relation to three facets of political representation: descriptive representation, i.e.,

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the characteristics of individuals elected to political office; substantive representation, i.e., the articulation of policy concerns by specific office-holders; and symbolic representation, i.e., the broader meanings and effects that the presence of different kinds of elected officials have for the public at large. In each section, I map the achievements and limits of current findings in terms of cross-case comparisons and the inclusion of gender as an analytic concept. I then sketch various directions for future research, based on gaps in collective knowledge stemming from the lack of a comparative and gendered lens. The overall 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. 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 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 percentage of women in national parliaments tends to be higher in countries with proportional representation (PR) electoral systems than those with majoritarian electoral arrangements.[4] These systems often have higher district magnitudes, which open the way for women to be included as the total number of seats increases,[5] and closed party lists, which enable parties to place women in electable positions on party slates.[6] PR is also associated with effective implementation of gender quota policies aimed at increasing the number of female candidates.[7] Further, many studies observe strong correlations with women's overall rates of education and labor force participation,[8] as well as levels of national development,[9] whose effects are attributed to modernization processes that help women move into higher social and economic roles that lead to greater influence in politics.[10] There also appear to be close connections with cultural attitudes towards equality, as the number of women in politics is typically higher in Protestant countries[11] and in countries where citizens are more open to women in leadership positions.[12]

Despite the general nature of these conclusions, however, closer examination reveals that most of these results derive from studies of advanced Western democracies. Although some work confirms these findings in non-Western cases,[13] other studies discover that many of these factors play little or no role in developing countries.[14] Further, most research gauges the causal impact of variables at single moments in time. Yet even the role of one of the most important factors in this literature, the electoral system, has tended to vary over time: before 1970 women's representation was roughly the same in PR and majoritarian systems.[15] Qualitative research nuances and helps to explain some of these patterns. These scholars observe, for example, how features of electoral systems influence women's strategies, as well as elite reactions, concerning the nomination of female candidates. This explains why PR generally provides greater opportunities for women,[16] even though women's descriptive representation has increased in some cases without a change in the electoral system,[17] while it has remained relatively stable in others even as the electoral system has undergone reform.[18] They often confirm the link with indicators of women's status,[19] but challenge findings regarding development, pointing out that many developed countries have low numbers of women in parliament, while some developing countries have seen dramatic increases in recent years.[20] Similarly, egalitarian political cultures do appear to favor women's descriptive representation,[21] but in some instances, women assume prominent political positions in countries with strongly patriarchal religious and cultural norms, usually as a result of family connections or as a form of political patronage by powerful male leaders.

Current work on women, gender, and descriptive representation thus centers 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 this literature, has also served to limit the degree of comparative and gendered research on this facet of political representation. In terms of cases, most studies focus exclusively on women in parliament, at least partly due to the greater availability of national-level data. However, this focus has come at the expense of efforts to explore what variations in women's descriptive representation at the local, regional, and supranational levels might indicate about reasons behind women's exclusion from politics. The few studies that do address 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

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supra-state levels.[22] Similarly, scholars have largely overlooked the potential of examining multiple elections in the same country over time. These two types of research designs, making greater use of comparisons, offer promising paths for isolating the relative role of various factors across elections and over time.

As for gender, nearly all of this research focuses exclusively on women. This approach reflects an implicit assumption that men are the norm, while women are the deviant group to be explained. For this reason, shifting attention to gender by examining men and women together may offer new insights into the characteristics that shape access to elected office. To take one example, many scholars explore the relationship between the number of women in parliament and women's overall levels of education and types of workforce participation.[23] Yet they do not collect the same data on men, even though there are important disparities among men in terms of their education and access to prestigious professional positions. This raises questions about the appropriateness of such measures for women, especially given the increased professionalization of legislatures, which has contributed among other things to a decline the proportion of members from working-class backgrounds. Along similar lines, a great deal of research on the developing world highlights that most women who achieve political office in these countries tend to have family ties to prominent male politicians.[24] Male officials in these countries, however, also tend to come from political families. These two trends suggest that the men and women who win election may resemble one another more than do the electorate. Including men in the analysis would thus greatly enrich knowledge on the factors that do and do not shape access to political office. Further, it would enable a more nuanced understanding of reasons for changes in women's under-representation by noting their related effects on patterns of men's over-representation.[25] Such an approach would call greater attention to the zero-sum nature of these developments. It would also afford a closer look into the erosion of connections between masculinity and politics as women's increased presence, through efforts to "feminize" political life, weakens associations between men and the public sphere. Thus, while studies of descriptive representation are relatively well-developed within the comparative literature on women and politics, there are still many questions related to gender for scholars to explore in their efforts to determine why fewer women than men are elected to political office.

Women, Gender, and Substantive Representation[26]

Comparative studies on women, gender, and substantive representation are much rarer. Most work on this aspect of representation involves analyzing women's priorities or behavior in legislative arenas to determine whether or not women "make a difference" when they occupy political office. The fact that most of this research focuses 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. Interestingly, many of these studies are implicitly comparative, examining multiple states, policies, years, and parts of the policy-making process. Yet most do not frame their findings in comparative terms but rather as elements in a single larger dataset. At the same time, the few scholars who do frame their research findings in relation to the conclusions of studies of other countries generally do not reflect on how appropriate these assessments might be, given important differences in political context. Expanding the range of comparison, as well as moving beyond exclusive attention to female legislative behavior, presents an opportunity to explore how gendered identities and interests are articulated and advanced in politics.

Existing literature on this topic mainly seeks to understand the degree to which women seek and are able to promote women's issues once elected to political office. While scholars often detect distinct policy priorities among male and female legislators,[27] 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, anticipating that as women's numbers increase past a "critical mass," attention to women's policy concerns will grow. 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.[28] However, four other scenarios are also possible: 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;[29] 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;[30] 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;[31] and a rise in the 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.[32]

To explain these patterns, scholars identify various factors that might limit or enhance opportunities for women to translate policy preferences into legislative initiatives on behalf of women as a group. Many point to institutional rules and norms that compel women to conform to existing masculine legislative practices in ways that undermine

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their ability to integrate women's perspectives into public policy-making,[33] as well as certain institutional innovations, like women's caucuses and women's policy agencies, that support a gendered lens.[34] Party affiliation and ideology also play a crucial role. Mechanisms of candidate selection often determine what kinds of women are elected, while pressures for party discipline typically shape the policy positions they are likely to take once they accede to political office,[35] in addition to the fact that some party ideologies offer greater or lesser opportunities for women to pursue feminist policy concerns.[36] At the same time, 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. Female legislators tend to differ most from men when it comes to setting the legislative agenda and proposing new bills that address issues of concern to women,[37] although male legislators often later vote for these bills at similar rates as women.[38]

While most of these findings are framed in universal terms, a closer look reveals that the majority are based on the intensive study of a single-country case—in most instances, the United States. All the same, many scholars seek to maximize the number of observations by analyzing multiple states,[39] elections,[40] and policy areas.[41] For many, however, this strategy is adopted mainly to increase the number of data points. Yet, an opportunity exists here to apply a more comparative lens to explore what a juxtaposition of cases, viewed as wholes, might reveal more generally about efforts to promote women's interests in politics. A second way to enlarge the number of cases, and thereby increase the number of potential comparisons, is to expand what are understood as "sites" of political representation. Women's issues are pursued and debated at different and often interacting levels of government, namely supranational, national, regional, and local political assemblies. They are also raised in a variety of political forums, like legislatures, cabinets, non-governmental organizations, women's policy agencies, civil society, courts, constitutions, and political parties.[42] While women in these various sites may work together to promote women's policy concerns,[43] they may also substitute for[44] or compete with one another[45] 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.

In terms of incorporating gender, research on substantive representation is more sensitive to differences among women, as well as between women and men, than existing work on descriptive representation. While many political theorists aim to discern a shared perspective among women in order to justify calls for their increased presence in politics, most empirical studies stress divisions among women—like race, class, age, and party affiliation—that prevent the formation of a collective female legislative agenda.[46] Indeed, some argue that identity categories like "women" are inherently exclusionary and serve to reify one difference while erasing and obscuring others.[47] For 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.[48] Others simply 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.[49] These concerns are echoed in competing definitions of women's issues, which range from feminist definitions that focus on increases in autonomy and scope for personal choice[50] to more inclusive ones that capture a broader range of issues affecting women's everyday lives.[51] Despite these nuanced arguments with regard to gender, however, very few studies explore the full potential of this concept—for example, by examining how men may articulate women's concerns, or alternatively, how men might represent men's concerns in political life. These questions, in turn, raise questions about the enactment of masculinities and femininities in the political sphere, to the extent that men and women conform or break with established gender roles through their policy priorities and behavior in multiple policy-making arenas. Existing research on substantive representation is therefore quite advanced as regards questions of gender, but could do more to integrate men, as well as 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 individuals—to explore the claims that are articulated[52] and the actions that are taken in the name of representing particular groups.

Women, Gender, and Symbolic Representation[53]

In contrast to descriptive and substantive representation, comparative research on women, gender, and symbolic representation is virtually non-existent. In part, this is due 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.[54] Two other definitions 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,[55] finding that both men and women respond positively to increased numbers of women.[56] The second frames it in relation to the effects that women's presence has on voter perceptions of politics as a male domain.[57] Viewed more broadly, these two definitions refer to the cultural meanings and ramifications that stem from the representative process,

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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 thus requires establishing which aspect of symbolic representation is being investigated and then exploring these dynamics in relation to a broader range of cases to discern the ways and conditions under which the composition of legislatures has an impact on citizen attitudes and behaviors. 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.

Taken as a whole, current studies offer mixed results with regard to the symbolic role or importance of female legislators. Some scholars find that male and female respondents believe that government is more democratic when more women are present.[58] In contrast, others report that women represented by women were generally more positive about their representatives, but this did not lead them to be more positive about politics in general.[59] Similarly, many authors document shifts in the attitudes of voters following the election of more women to political office, arguing that the inclusion of women sends important signals to female citizens that lead them to become more politically involved, or at least, to feel more politically efficacious.[60] Others find, however, that the increased presence of women appears to have little or no impact on the political engagement of female constituents.[61] 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.[62] Others emerge from large-scale surveys that compare male and female attitudes and behaviors in relation to the women elected to political office.[63]

With some exceptions, most of this work focuses on developments within a single country, most often the United States. However, many of the research designs employed can in fact be considered comparative in at least two senses: they often explore the attitudes and behaviors of many respondents and they occasionally address differences between women and men. Yet, as several recent studies show,[64] the greatest leverage for parsing out these causal effects may come from cross-national research, which permits more extensive variation in the contextual conditions that might shape symbolic effects. For example, the degree of change in citizen attitudes and behaviors is likely to vary across countries with divergent political histories, electoral and political party systems, levels of development, and women's social and economic status. Adopting a more explicitly comparative approach, therefore, may offer new insights into the conditions under which—if any—the symbolic effects of women's presence tend to be positive, neutral, or even negative.

Turning to gender, research on symbolic representation has gone much further than the literature on descriptive and substantive representation to integrate both men and women into the analysis. Nonetheless, little work has explored how prevailing ideas about femininity and masculinity might affect evaluations of female candidates, as well as perceptions of male and female voters. Yet, attending to questions of gender may offer a more nuanced and accurate account of the dynamics at work behind broad statistical findings. 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 gender balance is a more just arrangement. It is also possible, however, 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 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 obscure how gendered patterns of socialization may 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.[65] 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 explicit gendered lens is thus likely to offer quite different—or at least a greater range of—information about various kinds of symbolic effects, facilitating improved understanding of links between patterns of representation and citizens' political engagement.

Towards a Comparative-Gendered Approach

An extensive literature in political science addresses issues of political representation. Feminist research on this topic has used quantitative and qualitative tools 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 and for women as a group. Despite a growing literature, however, many questions remain to be asked with regard to the comparative and gendered nature of these insights. This essay surveys the field and then sketches some directions for future research—both feminist and non-feminist—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. Yet, if cases are conceived more broadly, it is possible to broaden the scope of comparison to encompass the study of various kinds of subnational entities, including regions, municipalities, groups,

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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 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 the access, behavior, and effects of men's and women's presence in political office. A promising means for pushing research in new directions is therefore to combine the tools of comparative politics and feminism in ways that foster the emergence of a more explicit comparative politics of gender, in order to shape a new type of political science attentive to the bounded and gendered nature of the dynamics observed in particular contexts around the world.

Notes

1 George and Bennett 2005.
2 Gerring 2004.
3 Hawkesworth 2006.
4 McAllister and Studlar 2002.
5 Welch and Studlar 1990.
6 Caul 1999.
7 Krook 2009.
8 McDonagh 2002; Rosenbluth, Salmond, and Thies 2006.
9 Matland 1998.
10 Inglehart and Norris 2003.
11 Kaiser 2001.
12 Inglehart and Norris 2003.
13 Paxton 1997; Yoon 2004.
14 Matland 1998.
15 Kaiser 2001.
16 Matland 1995.
17 Sainsbury 1993.
18 Beckwith 1992.
19 Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1994.
20 Goetz and Hassim 2003.
21 Bystydzienski 1995.
22 Norris and Franklin 1997; Vengroff, Nyiri, and Fugiero 2003.
23 Rosenbluth, Salmond, and Thies 2006.
24 Nanivadekar 2006.
25 Cf. Ohlander 2001.
26 Some of the interpretations in this section draw heavily on my work with Sarah Childs, especially Childs and Krook 2006.
27 Barrett 1995; Thomas 1991.
28 Thomas 1994.
29 Bratton 2005.
30 Hawkesworth 2003.
31 Crowley 2004.
32 Carroll 2001.
33 Carroll 2001; Hawkesworth 2003.
34 Thomas 1991; Weldon 2002.
35 Cowley and Childs 2003.
36 Reingold 2000; Swers 2002.
37 Childs 2004; Swers 2002.
38 Tamerius 1995.
39 Reingold 2000; Thomas 1994.
40 Childs 2004; Swers 2002.
41 Carroll 2001.
42 Celis, Childs, Kantola, and Krook 2008; Chappell 2002.
43 Lovenduski 2005.
44 Weldon 2002.
45 Haas 2005.
46 Dodson and Carroll 1991; Swers 2002.
47 Carroll 2001.
48 Towns 2003.
49 Childs 2004; Reingold 2000.
50 Reingold 2000.
51 Swers 2002.
52 Cf. Saward 2006.
53 Many thanks to Lydia Anderson-Dana for her help in researching and discussing the literature discussed in this section. I am also indebted to an anonymous reviewer for additional suggestions.
54 Carroll 2002; cf. Pitkin 1967.
55 Childs 2004; Lawless 2004.
56 Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005.
57 High-Pippert and Comer 1998.
58 Karp and Banducci 2008; Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005.
59 Lawless 2004.
60 Atkeson 2003; High-Pippert and Comer 1998.
61 Zetterberg 2009.
62 Carroll 2002; Childs 2004.
63 Karp and Banducci 2008; Zetterberg 2009.
64 Karp and Banducci 2008; Wolbrecht and Campbell 2007.
65 Sanbonmatsu 2003.

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