
Gendering Politics, Feminising Political Science

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Introduction

The central theme of my research is the way gender is embedded in political institutions, mainly but not exclusively as expressed in patterns of political representation in democracies. In common with other academics of my generation who were interested in politics, I started as a political scientist, though a sceptical and critical one, with a strong commitment to broader notions of social science as an integrated project. Early on I was particularly doubtful about the ‘science’ part of the term, largely because there were so many competing versions of it around but also because many political scientists almost wilfully adopted the narrowest possible uses of the term. The idea of political science was so contested that the founders of the UK Political Studies Association (PSA) avoided the term, preferring the more anodyne and inclusive ‘Political Studies’. I have often thought they might better have chosen the term science and defended it as systematic inquiry, observation and thinking. For me, political science is the systematic study of politics, a project that is impossible without feminism.

Why feminism?

Feminism was an influence from the earliest stages of my research. My way of studying and thinking about politics was slowly moulded into a fairly consistent approach to problems developed in response to the challenges of concept formation and research design that I encountered and, of course, the other researchers I worked with on different projects. My work covers gendering research into politics and its impact on the theorisation of political representation, the nature of women’s and feminist movements, political recruitment, research design including the supply and demand framework for analysing political recruitment, equality agencies, equality strategies and their contexts including especially political parties, all in an increasingly articulated framework of feminist institutionalism.

Why politics?

The term politics has a number of different meanings that include activities, organisations and conflicts in which the allocations of resources are decided. Harold Lasswell’s famous definition which stated that politics is who gets what, when and how is a common starting point. It is both succinct and much criticised. It misses at least two important questions (where and why) and overemphasises outcomes at the expense of process. Even so, it is a good place to start. For me, understanding politics turns on the idea of power and is a matter of understanding the interplays of ideas, institutions and interests that constrain and permit the use of

power in making authoritative effective decisions. In democratic systems, politics is often described in terms of politicians, governments, assemblies, elections and power. Democratic politics and processes that entail political representation and are ultimately a matter of the political arrangements and practices, especially the elections that permit leaders to decide the answers to Lasswell's questions. Authoritative decision making turns on electoral success which is achieved through the competition of ideas and interests organised by political institutions that include the political parties and the media. However, even where there are democratic trappings, all modern political systems are dominated by elites, by the few who have the capacity to manufacture the consent of the many.

Such institutional manifestations of politics are the tip of a very substantial iceberg. The central concept, if there is one, is power. For my generation of political scientists, power was a high concept, the essential component of authoritative decisions about public issues located variously in political institutions. Traditionally it was problematised by distinctions between power over, power to, affect, effect, power as a resource or capacity and, of course, distinctions between consent and coercion. But, however articulated, it was always present as a concept that required definition and operationalisation.

It is the centrality of power to its concerns that makes political science worthwhile for feminists, a point to which I return in the concluding chapter. The focus on power is what makes political science at its best a worthwhile discipline for feminists. As a political scientist, my understanding of political power emphasises the processes and contexts that sustain dominance of some groups or individuals by others. As a feminist I always consider the gender dynamics of the relationships between the dominant and dominated parties. Today, feminists draw on a range of theories of power, highlighting the foundation of public power in the 'private' sphere and contend that the exercise of power in the state and the economy depends on private arrangements. The gendering of those arrangements conceals the interdependencies of public and private life. But distinctions between public and private life in common articulations of politics have a major effect on the design, membership and agendas of political institutions.

These insights are founded in a longstanding feminist understanding of the state. For some time the feminist approach to political power was oblique as scholars worked through the implications of their insights into the smokescreen of the assumed split between public and private life that relegated women mainly to the private sphere. In the 1980s feminists were preoccupied with the state, much engaged in its 'deconstruction'. The early 1990s saw a shift from the notion of the state as a political entity that had knowable boundaries and functions to one of shifting networks of power and dominance (Watson 1990). This change coincided with the 'institutional turn' in political science which saw calls to 'Bring the state back in ...' (Evans *et al.* 1985). The subsequent emergence of the 'new' institutionalism brought a new emphasis on the rules (formal and informal)

Chapter One

Women in Parliament: Making a Difference*

with Azza Karam

Although women remain significantly under-represented in today's parliaments, they are now looking beyond the numbers to focus on what they can actually do while in parliament — how they can make an impact, whatever their numbers may be. They are learning the rules of the game and using this knowledge and understanding to promote women's issues and concerns from inside the world's legislatures. In so doing, they are not only increasing the chances of their own success, but they are also paving the way for a new generation of women to enter the legislative process. How can women maximise their impact on the political process through parliament? What strategies are most useful in increasing their effectiveness? What lessons can women MPs share with those aspiring to enter the field? In what ways have women impacted on political processes? This is our focus in this chapter, as we move from the road to parliament to making inroads in parliament.

Making Inroads in Parliament

In the Beijing Platform for Action (United Nations 1995), more than 180 governments agreed that 'Achieving the goal of equal participation of women and men in decision-making will provide a balance that...is needed...to strengthen democracy and promote its proper functioning'. When women in different parts of the world struggled to win the right to vote, they expected that this would inevitably lead to greater women's representation. Their expectations were not always met, as chapters in this volume have illustrated [these refer to the original volume]. Instead, women embarked on another long and difficult struggle to actually get women elected to parliament. Part of this effort involves convincing women voters to support women as their representatives. In most countries, much of the work centres on political parties, the typical channels of entry to national legislatures. Women inside and outside political parties organise and mobilise themselves to change long-established party methods of political recruitment.

Once women enter parliament, their struggle is far from over. In parliament, women enter a male domain. Parliaments were established, organised and dominated by men, acting in their own interest and establishing procedures for

* 'Women in Parliament: Making a difference' (with A. Karam), in J. Ballington and A. Karam (eds) *Women in Parliament: Beyond numbers. A revised edition*, Stockholm, International IDEA, 1998, pp. 125-158.

their own convenience. There was no deliberate conspiracy to exclude women. It was, in most cases, not even an issue. Most long-established parliaments were a product of political processes that were male-dominated or exclusively male. Subsequent legislatures are, for the most part, modelled on these established assemblies. Inevitably, these male-dominated organisations reflect certain male biases, the precise kind varying by country and culture.

Until recently, this ‘institutional masculinity’ has been an invisible characteristic of legislatures; it is embedded, pervasive and taken for granted. Only recently have legislatures’ masculine biases come under scrutiny. Indeed, in most countries, the political role of women in legislatures became a public issue only in the second half of the twentieth century.

In 2005, women constitute 16 per cent of members of parliaments (MPs) worldwide. In the Nordic countries, their numbers are highest at 40 per cent, while in the Arab states their representation (as of January 2005) was only 6.5 per cent (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2005).

As with previous efforts to try to get women elected to parliament, today women inside parliament are organising, mobilising, motivating and advancing women from inside the world’s legislatures. They are devising strategies and taking action to promote issues relevant to women and facilitate changes in legislation.

The actual impact women parliamentarians can make will depend on a number of variables that vary from country to country. These include the economic and political context in which the assembly functions, the background, experience and number of the women who are in parliament, and the rules of the parliamentary process. Each of these factors has a significant bearing on the extent to which women MPs can make a difference once elected. Because these factors vary significantly from country to country, it is difficult to make generalisations that are universally relevant regarding how women MPs can maximise their impact.

In addition, there is relatively little research and information available on what sort of impact women have made. Underscoring the need for more knowledge and understanding in this particular field of women and decision-making, the United Nations’ Beijing Platform for Action, together with the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), call for more documentation on ‘women making a difference’ in politics.¹ Extrapolating from what is available in this field and on the basis of interviews and discussions with women MPs around the world, we have identified some of the strategies and mechanisms women are using and can use to impact on the process. We have formulated a strategy, what we refer to as the ‘rules strategy’, to organize and present these ideas. The case studies that follow illustrate some of these strategies in action.

Presence

The extent of women’s impact will depend very much on the number of women in parliament who are motivated to represent women’s issues and concerns.

Feminists often argue that pioneer women parliamentarians became surrogate men — that they were socialised into the legislature and became indistinguishable from the men they replaced. We doubt this. Men are known to behave differently when women are absent. Because it upsets gender boundaries, the presence of even one woman will alter male behaviour; the presence of several women will alter it even further. West European experience shows that where women MPs have a mission to effect change even small numbers can produce significant results.

While the presence of even one woman can make a difference, it is most likely that long-term significant change will only be realised when there is a substantial number of women in parliament who are motivated to represent women's concerns. Buoyed by their colleagues, women MPs may then elicit the active partnership of their male counterparts. However, change does not simply result from numbers; rather it is a complex process of overcoming resistance to women in which presence is only one part of the necessary mixture. According to Drude Dahlerup, the test that a critical mass of women is present is the acceleration of the development of women's representation through acts that improve the situation for themselves and for women in general. These actions are critical acts of empowerment.

Once present in larger numbers, and willing to act together on behalf of women, women MPs can overcome the 'tokenism' phenomenon, that is, move beyond the perception they are subjected to, as well as be enabled to form interactive and strategic partnerships both within the legislatures and outside them. Within the legislatures, a critical mass makes it easier to cross party lines, and particularly to reach out to their male colleagues — the other half of an important equation for social transformation. Their presence as a critical mass also multiplies the possibilities and extent of their outreach to civil society organisations, which, in turn, enhances the momentum required in impacting on the legislature and its policies. In her studies of women MPs in Scandinavia and elsewhere, Dahlerup found that women politicians worked to recruit other women and developed new legislation and institutions to benefit women. As their numbers grew it became easier to be a woman politician and public perceptions of women politicians changed (Drude 1988; *see also* Lovenduski 2005). In 2005, Mercedes Mateo Diaz found in her study of Belgian and Swedish legislators that as the presence of women MPs increases so does their social representativeness (Mercedes 2005). When the numbers of women were low, at around 15 to 20 per cent, women MPs were less like women voters than male MPs are like male voters. The differences are due to distortions caused by recruitment procedures that were designed to select suitable men. To succeed in such processes women have to display 'male qualifications'; hence they are more likely to have characteristics associated with male MPs. For example, they may have careers in male-dominated professions such as business or law. To display such characteristics they may have sacrificed domestic lives, and hence are less likely than men or women in the general population to have children. However, as the proportion of women in parliament

Chapter Two

Westminster Women: The Politics of Presence*

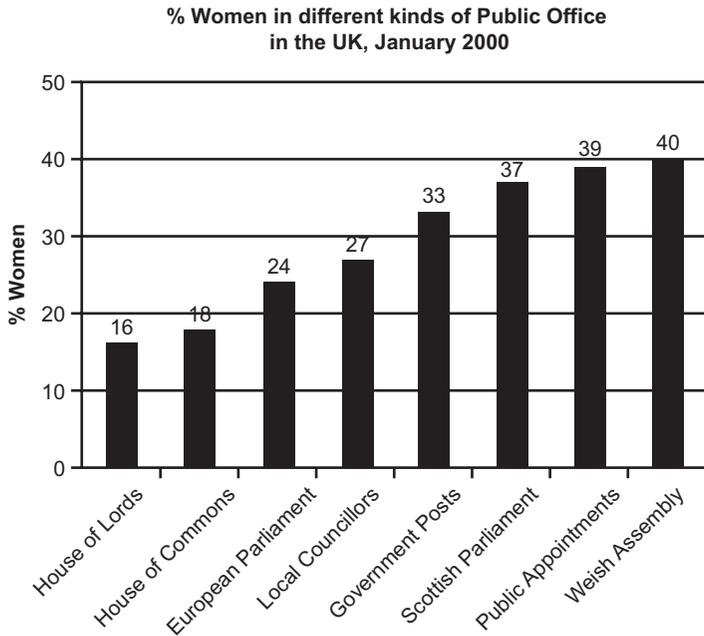
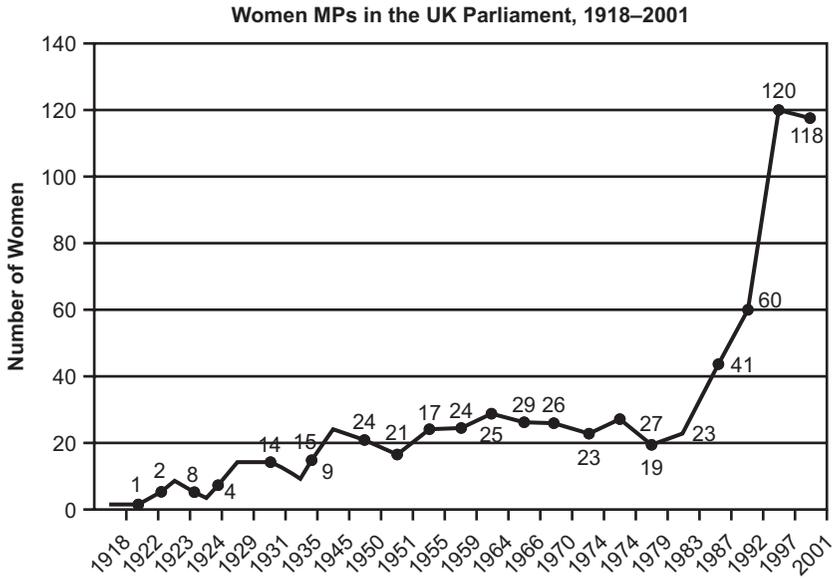
with Pippa Norris

The rising tide of women in elected office has raised expectations about their role as political leaders. Some hope, and others fear, that this development could alter the predominant political culture, the policy agenda, and the representation of women's interests in public life. This growth has occurred in many democracies and it is exemplified by dramatic developments at Westminster where the June 1997 election saw the entry of 120 women members into the UK House of Commons (18 per cent), double the number elected in 1992. This trend forms part of a larger phenomenon evident in the United Kingdom during the late-1990s where growing numbers of women entered other legislative bodies, thereby becoming 37 per cent of the Scottish Parliament and 40 per cent of the Welsh Assembly, 24 per cent of British MEPs in the European parliament, 16 per cent of the House of Lords, and 27 per cent of local councillors (*see* Figure 2.1). The change experienced in Britain represents part of a larger shift in cultural attitudes towards the political and social roles of women that has been sweeping through many postindustrial societies (Norris and Inglehart 2003).

What are the political consequences that flow from this development? And, in particular, did the entry of a substantial number of women MPs in the 1997 election, and their subsequent re-election in 2001, alter the predominant culture at Westminster? This chapter compares survey evidence drawn from a representative sample of almost 1,000 national politicians in Britain (including parliamentary candidates and elected members) to examine whether women leaders display distinctive attitudes and values which have the capacity to make a substantive difference for women's interests. The first part briefly explains the theoretical framework based on the politics of presence and outlines a model to test it empirically. Three sources of evidence are available to examine the theoretical claims. We argue that, given the serious constraints on back bench activities at Westminster, *behavioural* measures, such as roll-call data based on legislative voting rebellions, provide an unduly limited yardstick for examining the capacity of women politicians to offer a distinctive contribution to politics. *Self-reported* measures taken at face value without independent verification, such as interviews where women politicians claim to act for women, are equally suspect given the electoral self-interest embodied in such claims. In contrast, *cultural* measures provide the most suitable, systematic and reliable evidence, where any gender

* 'Westminster women' (with P. Norris), *Political Studies*, 2003, 51(1), pp. 84–102.

Figure 2.1: Women in Public Office, UK



differences in attitudes and values can be regarded as a *necessary*, although not *sufficient*, condition for women representatives to act for women as a group. If women and men MPs share similar attitudes and values, then it seems unlikely that the election of more women backbenchers has the potential to make any sort of substantive policy difference, whether through legislative votes, parliamentary activities, or influencing the policy process behind the scenes. We theorise that the values of women and men politicians can be expected to prove similar on many traditional left-right issues that have long divided British party politics, but that they can be expected to display the most significant contrasts towards the key issues that most directly affect women's ability to lead an independent life. The second part describes the data and measures, including the British Representation Study survey of 1,000 candidates and members conducted in the 2001 general election. The third part examines the evidence for gender differences concerning five scales measuring attitudes and values that commonly divide British party politics. The results confirm that once we control for party, there are no significant differences among women and men leaders across the value scales measuring support for the Free Market economy, for European Integration and for Traditional Moral values. Yet on the values and attitudes that are most closely related to women's autonomy — namely the Affirmative Action and the Gender Equality scales — women and men express significantly different values within each party. This pattern persists even after controlling for other social variables that commonly influence attitudes, such as age, education and income. The conclusion summarises the main findings and considers why and under what conditions they may have important consequences.

Theoretical Framework

The flourishing and extensive literature on women and public office has developed two central strands. The first focuses on '*descriptive* representation', seeking to identify the reasons why so few women are elected to legislative bodies and the importance of barriers such as the electoral system, the role of party recruitment processes and the resources and motivation that women bring to the pursuit of elected office (see Darcy *et al.* 1994; Lovenduski and Norris 1993, 1996; Norris and Lovenduski 1995). Descriptive representation can be regarded as intrinsically valuable, for example Mansbridge (1999) argues that for African-Americans and for women, both historically disadvantaged social groups, the entry of representatives into public office improves the quality of group deliberations, increases a sense of democratic legitimacy, and develops leadership capacity. The second approach pursues the related question of whether, if elected, women will 'make a difference' in legislative life and political leadership, or if they will offer '*substantive*' representation of women (Diamond 1977; Thomas 1994; Norris 1996; Tremblay 1998; MacDougal 1998; Carroll 2001; Swers 2001). Feminist theorists suggest that the presence of women in the House of Commons offers possibilities that women are not just 'standing as' women but also 'acting for' women as a group (Phillips 1995; Lovenduski 1997). This argument is commonly heard when

it is assumed that, due to their particular life-experiences in the home, workplace and public sphere, women politicians prioritise and express different types of values, attitudes and policy priorities, such as greater concern about childcare, health or education, or a less conflictual and more collaborative political style (*see*, for example, Brooks *et al.* 1990; Perrigo 1996; Phillips 1995, 1998; Short 1996; MacDougal 1998). Although these issues are of long-standing theoretical interest, in Britain until recently there have been so few women serving in most levels of public office that it seemed premature to ask what impact they may have on the policy process. The changing situation during the 1990s, however, calls for these issues to be re-examined.

How might such a distinctive contribution be identified and tested? The theoretical framework in this study draws on accounts of ‘the politics of presence’ developed by Phillips (1995, 1998). Acknowledging that mechanisms of accountability (the politics of ideas) are necessary to representative democracy, Phillips argues that women have a distinctive group identity based upon shared common interests on issues such as abortion, childcare or equal opportunities in education and the labour force. There is nothing particularly novel about these type of claims, after all the analogy can be drawn with many other groups which have sought to secure legislative representation within established or separate parties to articulate and defend their interests. Such a process is exemplified in the early twentieth century by the creation of the British Labour Party by trade unions to advance collective labour organisations and the legal right to strike (Pelling 1968). Acknowledging that men and women have complex sets of interests that both diverge and overlap, and that women as a group are far from monolithic, Phillips points out that ‘... the variety of women’s interests does not refute the claim that interests are gendered. ... The argument from interest does not depend on establishing a unified interest of all women: it depends, rather, on establishing a difference between the interests of women and men’ (Phillips 1995: 68). If, however, women are divided by predominant crosscutting cleavages, such as those of social class, region, ethnicity or religion, and by ideological divisions between left and right, then these factors may override any common or shared interests associated with gender. Indeed, the classic account of the evolution and consolidation of parties in Western Europe, by Lipset and Rokkan (1967), argued that other cleavages in the electorate were the primary building blocks of party competition — including those dividing the core and periphery regions, Catholics and Protestants, and workers and the bourgeoisie. Lipset and Rokkan assumed that any residual differences between women and men were subsumed under these primary social cleavages.

Before we can test the claims of the politics of presence thesis it is necessary to establish a clear definition of ‘women’s interests’. Although this concept is common, it remains controversial in feminist scholarship. As Wängnerud notes, problems include the relationship between ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ interests, as well as the relationship between gender and other social divisions like race and class (Wängnerud 2000: 68). Defined broadly, if ‘women’s interests’ are understood to include all political issues where women and men may disagree, for

example, in their attitudes towards the deployment of armed forces, the protection of the environment, or the desirability of a strong and effective welfare safety net, then it becomes unclear how to define the boundaries of 'women's interests'. Instead it seems preferable to adopt a strong but narrower definition of women's interests since such a formulation will improve its possibilities for effective theorising and measurement. In line with Wängnerud (2000: 70), we define women's shared interests to be in those policies that increase their autonomy. The recognition of such interests is a *process* of politicisation that can be treated as a number of steps in which (1) women are recognised as a social category, that is the gender neutrality of politics is contested; (2) the inequalities of power between the sexes are acknowledged; and, (3) policies to increase the autonomy of women are made. In her analysis of interview data on successive cohorts of Swedish legislators, Wängnerud shows how each step influences the political process and concludes that women's presence in the Riksdag has brought about a shift of emphasis whereby women's interests have become more central in politics. She found differences in attitudes between women and men across a wide range of issues and showed how these differences provoke political changes that lead to an increased legislative sensitivity to women's interests by all politicians. Wängnerud shows that the articulation and mobilisation of such interests in the Riksdag is the work of women politicians (Wängnerud 2000).

We recognise that the effects of women's presence in politics do not happen automatically but exist and become explicit under certain conditions. Instructive here is the work of Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977) on gender relations within industrial corporations. Kanter's argument is that the size of a minority matters. *Uniform* groups contain only men or only women. *Skewed* groups contain a large imbalance of men or women, up to about 15 per cent of the minority group. *Tilted* groups contain about 15–40 per cent of the opposite sex. Lastly, *balanced* groups contain 40–50 per cent of each sex. Kanter suggests that once a group reaches a certain size — somewhere in the tilted group range — the minority starts to assert itself and from this assertion there eventually follows a transformation of the institutional culture. This argument implies that rather than steady evolution, there is a critical 'tipping point' that depends upon numbers. When a group remains a small minority within a larger society its members are tokens who will seek to adapt to their surroundings, conforming to the predominant rules of the game. They will not act to increase the size of their group. If anything their various available strategies ('queen bee', assimilation and so on) will tend to keep the number of tokens appropriately and conveniently small. Once the group reaches a certain size, however, their available strategies change and lead to a qualitative shift in the nature of group interactions, as the minority starts to assert itself and thereby transform the institutional culture, norms and values. Kanter fails to explain why change in the relative numbers of women and men leads to institutional, cultural or policy change. Such effects are not a simple result of increasing numbers, they are an effect of the processes of mobilisation that are made possible by the presence of women in a traditionally masculine institution. In the language of feminist scholarship it is an effect of gender, defined as the socially ascribed characteristics of women and men.