

Cultural Attitudes towards Women in Politics and Women's Political Representation in Legislatures and Cabinet Ministries

By

Rebecca Teczar, Katherine Rocha, Joseph Palazzo and Roger Clark

Rhode Island College

Abstract

Women's representation in national legislatures and cabinet ministries worldwide has generally lagged far behind their labor force participation and educational achievements. Theories about their political under-achievement have considered three types of explanations: political institutions that limit demand for their political service; social-structural conditions that inhibit the supply of adequately prepared women; and cultural attitudes that affect both the demand for and supply of politically-interested women. Generally, the measurement of cultural attitudes has been too crude in cross-national, quantitative studies to discern much effect. Modeling our paper on the work of Paxton and Kunovich (2003), we use a direct measure of such attitudes to update and extend their research. The data we analyzed indicate strong support for the notion that examining differences in cultural attitudes is crucial for understanding variation in women's participation in both national legislatures and cabinet ministries.

Keywords: women in legislatures, women in cabinet ministries, attitudes towards women in politics

Introduction

While women have made great strides in the workforce and in attaining higher education, their progress in national political representation has been less dramatic. Thus, in 2017, although women were 47% of the U. S. labor force and 56% of college and university students (DeWolf 2017; Marcus 2017), they were just 23% of U. S. Senators, 19% of representatives in the House (CAWP 2018) and 22% of senior-level Cabinet members (Hansler 2018). The pattern in the U.S. roughly mirrors that of the world, where women were 48.5% of the labor force in 2010 (World Bank 2018a), 40% of the college and university students in 2016 (World Bank 2018b). In contrast, women were but a median of 20% of legislators in 2018 (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2018) and a median of 14% of ministry or cabinet position holders in 2017 (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2017). Women's disproportionately low representation at high levels of government remains an enduring issue throughout the world, helping to ensure gender inequality in most countries.

But the variation in women's representation in

legislatures-- from 3% for Haiti to 61% in Rwanda in 2017-- and ministries--from 0% in several countries to 53% in Norway in 2017-- is at least as interesting as the low averages. What can explain it? Previous research into women in national legislatures and ministries has emphasized three kinds of explanations: political, social-structural and cultural (e.g., Tripp and Kang 2008; Krook and O'Brien 2012). The political explanations have focused on the openness of political systems to women's political participation; the social-structural ones, on the available supply of eligible women; and the cultural ones on general ideas about the appropriateness of women in politics.

We have found only one cross-national, quantitative study that has reported substantial support for the cultural explanations: Paxton and Kunovich's (2003) study of women in legislatures. These authors made creative use of data provided by the *World Values Survey* in 1995. We update Paxton and Kuvonich's study and extend it by using more recent *World Values Survey* data to study cultural effects not only on women's participation in legislatures, but also their participation in national ministries or cabinets. Our study provides

evidence that gender ideologies affect the number of women in both of these governmental entities, even when we control for political and social-structural variables that have been shown to be salient for the understanding of those numbers since the turn of the 21st century.

Explaining Women's Legislative and Ministerial Representation

We've seen that women's participation in national legislatures and ministries varies tremendously (see above). But what can explain this variation?

Political Explanations

In general, political explanations, those crediting political institutions for women's participation at the highest levels of government, have garnered the greatest support in cross-national, quantitative analyses. These explanations tend to stress how much political systems create demand, or at least opportunities, for women's participation. In particular, and with regard to national legislatures, proportional-representation systems and national quotas have proven to be the most salient characteristics of nations that have relatively high numbers of women. Proportional-representation systems, as opposed to simple plurality systems (such as those used in the U. S.), compel parties to publish lists of candidates and tend to be associated with greater numbers of seats per voting district. This may not only encourage lead party leaders to include women to balance their tickets, but allows them to head their lists with their male candidates in packages that include females. In such packages the male candidates are often thought to be the stronger ones. Furthermore, single-member districts frequently lead parties to nominate candidates similar to the previous candidate; in multimember districts, they are freer to abandon this kind of precedence (Womack 2018). Proportional-representation systems have been consistently shown to be positively associated with women's representation in legislatures (e.g., Paxton and Kunovich 2003; Tripp and Kang 2008). Another variable shown to have such correlations is the presence of gender quotas, which have quickly become a significant feature of the electoral landscape. By 1985, only 4 countries had introduced such quotas; by 2005, 55 had done so (Paxton and Kunovich 2008: 339); and by 2017, 129 countries had them (International IDEA 2018). Quotas take a variety of forms, from parties voluntarily agreeing to

allocate a certain proportion of candidacies to women to national legal mandates that a certain number of seats be reserved for women. In Rwanda, for instance, 30 percent of all seats in all representative bodies are reserved for women.

Political explanations have also been advanced for women's participation in ministries or cabinets. Ministries or cabinets are created by presidents or prime ministers (or some interaction between the two). Krook and O'Brien (2012) hypothesized presidential systems, as opposed to prime ministerial systems or dual presidential and prime ministerial systems, would be more likely to yield female representation in ministries. Leaders in presidential systems may go outside the legislative body, as they do in the U. S., to find candidates for ministries, and therefore, in general, have a better chance of nominating females (in part because legislatures are largely made up of males). Prime ministers, on the other hand, often must appease powerful parliamentary members of their own parties or coalitions and, so, generally choose members of parliament to populate their ministries. Krook and O'Brien (2012) found support for this hypothesis. One might also expect that proportional-representation systems would be more likely than others to have women in ministries, simply on grounds that they tend to be more open to diverse backgrounds of political candidates in general. Krook and O'Brien found some support for this view too.

Social-Structural Explanations

Social-structural explanations for women's participation tend to focus on why the supply of women for high political office varies from one country to another. In general, these explanations haven't fared as well, in cross-national, quantitative analyses, as their political counterparts. But two variables that have been shown to have strong correlations (by Krook and O'Brien 2012) with women's access to ministerial or cabinet positions are women's participation in the labor force and women's representation in legislatures. And it makes sense that in countries where women are already engaged in the public sphere (as suggested by their labor force participation) and the political sphere (as suggested by their representation in legislatures) women would be more likely to be eligible candidates for ministerial or cabinet position than in countries where they are not so engaged.

Cultural Explanations

Attitudes and beliefs about appropriate women's roles in society can have a large impact on both the demand for and supply of women in high political positions (e.g., Paxton and Kunovich 2003; Tripp and Kang 2008; Krook and O'Brien 2012). Public ideas about the inappropriateness of women in politics can have a negative impact on political outcomes for women (e.g., Paxton and Kunovich 2003-- even controlling for political and social-structural conditions that would suggest an adequate demand for, and supply of, women. The main problem with most analyses that assess the importance of attitudes and beliefs is that they have substituted variables like region for more direct measures. Thus, analyses have found that Scandinavian countries are more likely to have female representation in legislatures and Middle Eastern countries, less likely (e.g., Tripp and Kang 2008). Scandinavian countries tend to have had unusually progressive and feminist histories of political change even among Western nations. In contrast, Middle Eastern countries tend to have had political systems that are unusually impervious to women's participation, even when compared to other primarily Muslim nations (Kenschaff and Clark 2016: 262-272). Krook and O'Brien (2012) used indicators like the U. N.'s Human Development Index, meant to capture the degree to which a country is "developed" in a variety of ways, as an indirect measure of gender norms, presumably associated with development. It may not be too surprising that such an indirect measure showed no association with women's participation in ministries and cabinets in Krook and O'Brien's analysis.

What Paxton and Kunovich (2003) did was introduce a newly available direct measure of attitudes about women in politics. This measure was based on national surveys of attitudes conducted in the *World Values Study*, Wave 3 from 1995 to 1998. They used summaries for 46 countries of respondents' answers to questions, finding that agreement to the statement "On the whole, men make better political leaders than women do" had a strong negative association with women's participation in national legislatures. Wave 6 of the *World Values Survey*, from 2010 to 2014, expanded coverage to 54 nations and yet, as far as we can tell, no researchers have investigated whether national responses to this attitudinal assertion continue to be associated either with women's participation in legislatures or with their participation in national ministries or cabinets. This paper reports our findings regarding two hypotheses:

#1: *The more a national population agrees with the view that men make better political leaders than women, the less likely are women to be represented in national legislatures.*

and

#2: *The more a national population agrees with the view that men make better political leaders than women, the less likely are women to be represented in national ministries.*

Methods

We use correlation analyses to examine the zero-order associations between independent variables and our two measures of women's representation in government. With just over 50 countries as units of analysis in our multivariate analyses involving our measure of cultural attitudes, and a relatively large number of independent variables, there are relatively few degrees of freedom for conducting simple linear multiple regression analyses. We therefore employ forward stepwise regression analyses as our form of multivariate analyses. We instructed the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences to add the most significant variable at each step of its processing until all variables not in the selected model had p values that were greater than .05.

We use easily accessible measures of women's representation in both legislatures and ministries (or cabinets). Our 2018 data on women in legislatures are from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2018). Our indicator is the percentage of seats held by women in the lower, or single, house of a nation's parliament or legislature. Our data on women in ministries are for 2017 and are from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2017). The indicator is the percentage cabinet-level seats held by women.

Wave 6 of the *World Values Survey (WVS)* was done between 2010 and 2014, yielding data on values and beliefs in 54 nations. The WVS, begun in 1981, involves a global network of social scientists, collecting information from nationally representative samples. While it does not supply data on all countries, the WVS nonetheless attempts to cover countries that are both rich and poor and are from all the world's major cultural zones. We have used the percentage of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing to the statement "On the whole, men make better political leaders than women do" as our indicator of cultural attitudes about women in politics. We observed that variation in such agreement was substantial: from only eight percent in Uruguay to 86% in Egypt. Eighteen percent of U. S. respondents

agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

As we have mentioned, quotas for women in politics have been shown to be positively correlated with their representation in legislatures (Tripp and Kang 2008). We measured the presence of a quota (coded 1 = yes; 0 = no) using data from International IDEA (2018). Of the 218 countries in our sample, 128 countries had some sort of quota. Forty of the countries in our eventual sample of 54 countries (74%) for which we have data on attitudes towards women in politics had quotas.

Proportional representation systems have been hypothesized to be positively correlated with women's representation in both legislatures and ministries (Tripp and Kang 2008; Krook and O'Brien 2012). We used data on the type of electoral system employed to elect legislatures in each country provided by ACE (2017) to determine which countries employed proportional representation systems. Of the 218 countries in our sample, 80 countries employ such a system; and 24 of those in our eventual sample of 54 countries (44%) for which we have appropriate data on political attitudes did so.

We expected that women's labor force participation would be a social-structural condition positively impacting women's representation in both legislatures and ministries. Our 2017 data on female labor force participation were from the World Bank (2017).

We expected countries with a presidential system to have higher levels of female representation in ministries and cabinets than countries with prime ministerial or mixed presidential and prime ministerial system. Our data on whether countries had a presidential system were from Wikipedia entries on individual countries. Fifty-three of the 177 countries on which we could obtain information about executive systems had presidential systems, and 16 of the 52 countries (30.8%) that made it into our stepwise regression analyses did so.

Results

First, we report the results of our tests of zero-order relationships between key variables and women's participation in legislatures and ministries and then present evidence of the strongest controlled correlates. **Table 1** shows, for example, that people's agreement with the assertion "On the whole, men make better political leaders than women do" has a very strong, negative association ($r = -.46$) with the presence of women in legislatures, even stronger than the two political variables, measuring the presence of quotas for women ($r = .31$) and the presence of proportional representation

systems ($r = .32$). Similarly, their agreement with this statement has a very strong, negative association ($r = -.58$) with women's participation in ministries, even stronger than that with women in parliaments (.50), the presence of proportional representation systems (.31), their participation in the formal labor force (.30), and whether the nation is Scandinavian (.44). (See **Table 1**.)

Table 1. Correlates of Women's Representation in Legislatures and Ministries

	Pearson Correlation Coefficients	
	Women in Legislatures	Women in Ministries
Women in Legislatures	1.00*** (193)	.50*** (187)
Quota	.31*** (193)	.14 (187)
Proportional Representation	.32*** (193)	.31*** (187)
Female Labor Force Participation	.19* (177)	.30*** (172)
Presidential System	.09 (175)	.16* (170)
Scandinavia	.27*** (193)	.44*** (187)
Middle East	-.24*** (193)	-.23*** (187)
Men Better than Women in Politics	-.46*** (52)	-.58*** (52)

Notes: Ns are in parentheses; * indicates significance at .05 level; ***, at .001 level.

Our multivariate analyses involving key variables show even greater support for the contention that cultural attitudes are salient. Thus, **Table 2** shows that, in a stepwise regression involving women in legislatures, only the national attitude towards women in politics and the presence of a proportional-representation system make it into the model. Even the presence of a quota system favoring women candidates doesn't do so, when cultural attitudes towards women in politics are controlled. It is possible that such attitudes are the reason why the correlation between the presence of quotas and the presence of women in legislatures exists—it may act as an antecedent variable for that relationship. (See **Table 2**.)

Table 2. Stepwise Regression of Women in Legislatures on Key Variables

Standardized Regression Coefficients	
	Women in Legislatures
Men Better than Women in Politics	-.34**
Proportional Representation	.30*
Adjusted R-square	.26
N	(51)

Notes: Excluded variables: Quota, Scandinavia, Middle East, Female Labor Force Participation; N is in parenthesis; ** indicates significance at .01 level; *, at .05 level.

If our 2017 data help us to update Paxton and Kunovich's (2003) finding that, at the turn of the 21st century, attitudes towards women's participation in politics were associated with their access to legislatures, then **Table 3** gives us our first indication of how strongly these attitudes affect their participation in ministries as well. In fact, this association (beta = -.43) is considerably stronger for women in ministries than it is for women in legislatures (beta = -.34) and enables us, with just two other variables (Scandinavia, with a beta of .36, and presidential system, with a beta of .31) to explain over twice the variation in women's access to ministries (adjusted R-square = .53) than we were able to explain in women's access to legislatures (adjusted R-square = .26). (See **Table 3**.)

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have argued, that cultural beliefs and attitudes are an underestimated factor in views on women in politics. We used a direct measure of attitudes about women's viability as political leaders. With the data we analyzed, we were able to replicate and update what Paxton and Kunovich (2003) had shown to be true at the beginning of the 21st century: that cultural and societal attitudes continue to be strong predictors of women's representation in national legislatures into the second decade of the 21st century. Perhaps a greater contribution of our research, however, is showing that these attitudes are an even stronger predictor of women's access to ministerial or cabinet positions. To our knowledge, no previous researchers have shown

Table 3. Stepwise Regression of Women in Ministries on Key Variables

Standardized Regression Coefficients	
	Women in Ministries
Men Better than Women in Politics	-.43***
Scandinavia	.36***
Presidential system	.31**
Adjusted R-square	.53
N	(50)

Notes: Excluded variables: Proportional representation, Middle East, Female Labor Force Participation, Women in Legislature; N is in parenthesis; *** indicates significance at .001 level; **, at .01 level.

that women's access to cabinet and ministerial positions is so linked to cultural attitudes.

Although political variables may be seen as measures of the demand for women representatives and social-structural variables, as measures of their potential supply, we reiterate Paxton and Kunovich's (2003) point that cultural variables affect *both* demand and supply. On the demand side, beliefs about the appropriateness of women in politics undoubtedly affect the chances that voters and party leaders choose women as leaders. On the supply side, positive attitudes undoubtedly increase women's willingness to run and/or accept nominations for office.

Our research supports earlier findings that political factors have effects on women's representation in both legislatures and ministries, independent of cultural beliefs or attitudes. Proportional-representation systems are more likely than other electoral systems (such as the plurality system used in the U. S.) to be associated with women's access to legislatures. Presidential systems, as opposed to prime ministerial or mixed systems, seem relatively more likely to elevate women to ministerial or cabinet positions. Although Donald Trump's cabinet (22% female) may have fewer women members than did Barack Obama's cabinet (30% first term) or Bill Clinton's cabinet (32%, first term) (Hansler 2018), Trump's cabinet still has a higher percentage of females than does Teresa May's cabinet (18%) (BBC News 2018) or the international median (14%). This probably reflects the greater ease with which presidents, as compared to

prime ministers, can draw from a pool of candidates outside of government.

The practical implications of our study may not seem obvious. Attitudes and beliefs are, after all, famously difficult to change—perhaps even more so than political systems. On the other hand, as recent changes in American attitudes towards gay marriage suggest, societal attitudes are malleable. Even more relevant, the dramatic upsurge in women candidates in 2018 U. S. House of Representatives elections seems directly related to a fairly dramatic change in attitudes about (and by) women following the 2016 presidential elections and the revelations about the sexual misconduct of some men in positions of power (Nilsen 2018).

References

- ACE. 2018. The Electoral Knowledge Network: Comparative Data. <http://aceproject.org/epic-en>. Retrieved 7/23/18.
- BBC News. 2018. Who's Who Guide: Teresa May's Cabinet. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-42615109>. Retrieved 7/23/18.
- CAWP (Center for American Women and Politics). 2018. Women in the U.S. Congress 2018. Rutgers University. <http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/women-us-congress-2018>. Retrieved 7/23/18.
- De Wolf, Mark. 2017. 12 Stats about Working Women. U.S. Department of Labor Blog. / <https://blog.dol.gov/2017/03/01/12-stats-about-working-women>. Retrieved 7/23/18.
- Hansler, Jennifer. 2018. GOP Touts Women in Trump Cabinet—But the Number Lags Behind Obama, Clinton. *CNN Politics*. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/10/politics/gop-women-instagram/index.html>. Retrieved 7/23/18.
- International IDEA. 2018. Gender Quotas Database. <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas>. Retrieved 7/23/18.
- International-Parliamentary Union. 2017. Women Politics: 2017. <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/infographics/2017-03/women-in-politics-2017>. Retrieved 7/23/18.
- International-Parliamentary Union. 2018. Women in National Parliaments. <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.Htm>. Retrieved 7/23/18.
- Kenschaft, Lori and Roger Clark (and Desiree Ciambrone). 2016. *Gender Inequality in Our Changing World: A Comparative Approach*. New York: Routledge.
- Krook, Mona Lena and Diana Z. O'Brien. 2012. All the President's Men? The Appointment of Female Cabinet Minister Worldwide. *The Journal of Politics*. 74(3): 840-855.
- Marcus, Jon. 2017. Why Men are the New College Minority. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/08/why-men-are-the-new-college-minority/536103/>. Retrieved 7/23/18.
- Nilsen, Ella. 2018. A Record-Setting Number of Women are Running for the House in 2018. *Vox*. <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/4/6/17205790/women-running-congress-house-2018-record>. Retrieved 7/23/18.
- Paxton, Pamela and Sheri Kunovich. 2003. "Women Political Representation: The Importance of Ideology?" *Social Forces* 82(1): 87-114.
- Tripp, Aili Mari and Alice Kang. 2008. "The Global Impact of Quotas: On the Fast Track to Increased Female Legislative Representation." *Comparative Political Studies* 41(3): 338-361.
- Womack, Amelia. 2018. "7 Reasons Why Proportional Representation is a Feminist Issue." *NewStatesMan*. <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/staggers/2018/02/7-reasons-why-proportional-representation-feminist-issue>. Retrieved 7/23/18.
- World Bank. 2017. Labor Force Participation, Female. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?end=2017&start=2017&view=chart&year_high_desc=false. Retrieved 7/23/18.
- World Bank, 2018a. Labor Force Participation, Female. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/10/politics/gop-women-instagram/index.html>. Retrieved 7/23/18.
- World Bank. 2018b. School Enrollment, Tertiary, Female. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR.FE?view=chart>. Retrieved 7/23/18.

World Values Survey. 2018. Online Data Analysis.

<http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSONline.jsp>.

Retrieved 7/23/18.

About the Authors: Rebecca Teczar is a senior at Rhode Island College, majoring in Psychology. **Katherine Rocha** is a senior at Rhode Island College double majoring in Criminal Justice and Sociology. **Joseph Palazzo** is a junior at Rhode Island College, majoring in Computer Science. **Roger Clark** is a Professor of Sociology at Rhode Island College, where he teaches Research Methods and Sociology of Gender.