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Citizens and Norms of Representation

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Gender quotas transform comparative politics by reimagining the relationship between citizens and representatives. Gender quotas invite citizens to revisit their expectations of what it means to be represented and what makes a “good” politician. As quotas introduce new norms and emphasize different qualities to be valued in a representative, they provide an opportunity to reappraise the attributes and qualifications of all politicians, including men. Although some quota advocates have been keen to ensure that quota claims focus only on increasing women’s presence in politics, the wider debates surrounding quotas have ensured that they go beyond the simple feminization of politics. Arguments in favor of quotas based on gender differences also lead to expectations that quotas will effect wider change and renewal. Quotas thus afford scholars of comparative politics an opportunity to test whether the current actors and rules of the game of politics are necessarily the best and only way of doing things.

Rethinking the Ideal Politician

Popular imaginings of what a representative should look like—in terms of appearance, as well as qualifications, experience, personality traits, and biography—tend to reflect what has come before. The ideal-type representative is based on previous successful models. As the vast majority of representatives have been male, we tend to associate political representation with masculinity (Duerst-Lahti 2002; Norris and Lovenduski 1995). We also imagine politicians as possessing additional traits that distinguish them from other citizens, including high levels of

education (preferably at elite universities); high-status careers; prior political experience; strong networks; and traits such as confidence, oratory skills, and negotiation skills (Fox and Lawless 2004; Norris 1997).

One consequence of this combination of attributes is that politicians tend to come from elite backgrounds and to be somewhat unrepresentative of most citizens. Gender quotas have brought into sharp relief one element of the disconnect between politicians and society at large by highlighting the low proportions of women within representative institutions. Claims for women have been accompanied by claims for representation by other sectors within society, such as ethnic minorities. Quotas have also precipitated claims for more widespread political renewal, with women seen as agents of change. Implicit within these claims is a rejection of the status quo and a desire to see traditional elites replaced with more “modern” diverse representatives.

While it has already been well established that political institutions are not descriptively representative and that gender quotas are only one means of redressing this imbalance, there is considerably less research on the actual criteria needed to be an effective representative. The importance of education, social prestige, power, and influence are often accepted without question, even when the uneven distribution of these resources is a contributing factor to the overrepresentation of wealthy white men within positions of power. For example, a detailed discussion of the formal criteria for candidate selection by Hazan and Rahat (2010) omits to mention the informal norms that restrict political recruitment to a narrow pool.

Meanwhile, other qualities that might be of greater value to the act of representation, such as proximity to people’s daily concerns and shared experience and understanding of people’s problems, are seldom considered essential criteria when selecting candidates. Yet if feminization of politics is to bring real change and renewal, rather than simply replacing elite men with elite

women, then it will be necessary to rethink the criteria of candidate selection. Less value will need to be placed on traditional traits that might not actually be relevant to the act of representation, and more emphasis must be placed on the ability of representatives to articulate their constituents' concerns.

It could be argued that the remit of gender quotas does not extend this far and that it is entirely sufficient to replace some elite men with elite women. If the end goal of quotas is to enable women to accede to politics without recourse to a quota, however, then there is an intrinsic benefit to changing the norms of what makes a good representative to be more inclusive of women. Changing these norms might also remove the risk of stigmatization of women either for being “more of the same” or for being considered less distinguished than their male counterparts.

My research with women deputies in the French parliament identifies their collective sense of being more “in touch” with constituents' concerns, with their lives more closely resembling those of their fellow citizens (Murray and Sénac 2012a). Other work shows that women are more likely to get involved in community activities, such as church groups and parent teacher associations, and less inclined to become involved in party politics (Norris, Lovenduski, and Campbell 2004; Putnam 1995). While women's lower presence in political parties has been seen as justification for their absence from electoral politics due to a problem of supply (Lovenduski and Norris 1993), their political engagement in other areas provides them with a particular form of experience that should be highly valued. A wealthy male barrister who attended exclusive schools and universities may benefit from high social status, self-confidence, and strong training in making an argument. But he may be poorly placed to comprehend, let alone defend, the needs, interests, and aspirations of others.

Recognizing gender quotas' implications beyond the sex balance within legislatures provides a new angle for the comparative study of political representation. Quotas open up to scrutiny the full range of attributes possessed by politicians and provide a trigger for reevaluating who our representatives should be and what it means to represent. Moreover, while citizens may appreciate being represented by someone of superior intellect and capability, their interests may not best be served by having politicians who are too remote and removed from their daily concerns. Reconnecting politics with citizens is one way in which quotas can transform how scholars conceptualize the means and ends of politics.

Rethinking the Model Legislature

Discourses surrounding gender quotas often emphasize their ability to renew, modernize, and even transform politics (Dahlerup 2007). Gender stereotypes credit women with being more consensual, more honest, less confrontational, more communal, more pragmatic, and less corrupt than men (Alexander and Andersen 1993; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993). Irrespective of whether there is any accuracy to these claims, the association of women with these traits fosters expectations that quotas will change the style and performance of politics (Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2010).

Legislatures embody the public face of representation, where citizens are able to visualize democracy in action. Even though much of the more important work of politics takes place outside the public arena—for example, through the work of executives, unelected officials, closed-access committees, and informal backroom negotiations—it is parliamentary debates that are most visible to citizens and that most inform their understanding of the representative process. These debates are often boisterous and combative in their style, enacted under norms of

aggressive masculinity aimed at elevating one side of the argument while demonizing the opposition (Childs 2004; Sawer, Tremblay, and Trimble 2006). Partisan goals may underpin this spectacle, with raucous attacks on opponents and points-scoring being presumed to cast politicians in a more favorable light.

It is unclear, however, whether such a style of politics appeals to citizens. Nor is it appealing to many female politicians; female MPs have expressed distaste, discomfort, and even embarrassment over the theatrical showdowns that are presented to the public as representation (Childs 2004; Trimble 2006; author's interviews with French MPs). While gender quotas might not be sufficient to change the norms and styles of legislatures overnight, they provide a mandate for, and an expectation of, a different way of doing politics (Franceschet and Piscopo 2008).

Only a few comparative studies of legislatures recognize the explicitly gendered nature of parliaments as institutions (Crawford and Pini 2011; Puwar 2004; Rai 2010; Sawer, Tremblay, and Trimble 2006). In most studies, the masculine status quo is accepted as the norm, the proper and necessary way of conducting politics in the public eye. Women elected through a gender quota may, therefore, be unwilling to rock the boat, eager to appear both competent and nonthreatening.

Yet feminization that is not accompanied by other forms of change may lead to public disappointment. Quota women face expectations of difference in order to “justify” their presence and to prove that women add value to the political process. Sénac (2007) explores the problematic way in which women's presence has, in certain cases, become conditional on their ability to assert difference and effect change within politics.

Some forms of change may be fundamental, especially when women are present in sufficient numbers. For example, women may demand reform to parliamentary working hours,

which are seldom conducive to balancing a political career with family life. Women may also bring different policy areas to the table, resulting not only in better substantive representation of certain issues, but also a shift in the mindsets of their male colleagues, who may become more interested in and aware of (or even resistant to) issues of importance to women (Bratton 2002; Markham 2012).

Women may have different priorities and view different things as important; for example, they are often more concentrated within “soft” policy areas, such as social policy, education, and healthcare, while men are more likely to focus on issues like defense and security (Carroll 2008). Although this widespread pattern of gender segregation may be driven in part by gender stereotypes and the favoring of men for more prestigious portfolios, interview data indicate that it also stems from women’s own preferences and priorities (Murray and Sénac 2012b). Given that the policy areas favored by women enjoy large budgets and have significant impacts on citizens’ daily lives, it is unclear why these issues are considered less prestigious and important. Greater competition for executive portfolios and committee assignments in these issue areas might result in raising their profile and esteem.

In addition to long-term structural reform of the inner workings of parliaments, women might effect more immediate, symbolic changes in the performance of politics. A study of the French parliament revealed that the high profile, televised questions to the government follow traditional gender lines in a way that other types of parliamentary activity do not (Murray 2011). While deputies do not appear to have significantly different issue interests in most areas other than women’s rights, women are much more likely to ask questions within stereotypically “feminine” domains when the public are watching. Quotas have led to citizen expectations of gendered representation that alter the public performance of politics.

Conclusions

Gender quotas are a catalyst for change in a number of areas, including wider claims for descriptive representation, a reassessment of the qualities required to be a representative, and reform to the way that representation is performed. These changes shape citizens' expectations of politics and result in changes to the representative process that are both cosmetic and profound. The challenges that quotas present to the status quo need to be embraced by comparative scholars working on parliaments, legislators, and citizen attitudes. Quotas are changing not only the players, but also the rules of the game in ways we have yet fully to appreciate or even imagine.

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