Gender and politics

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**Abstract**

The relationship between gender and politics has unfolded in the context of male domination. Questions of representation and its consequences for political gender equality have always been central to understanding this relationship, as women politicians have consistently been under-represented and subjected to essentialist constructions of feminity. But a shift towards more complex representations is making gender less salient than before, as female politicians are entering legislatures around the world in larger numbers.

**Main text**

The relationship between gender and politics has unfolded within a history of male domination of political life. Along those lines, questions of the gendered representation of politicians, as well as the consequences of gender for politics and its reporting have always been central to attempts at understanding this relationship.

The public sphere – as the space of political life – has historically been gendered male, relegating women to the private sphere associated with family and home. The gendered dynamics of the public and private have made it more difficult for women to appear as legitimate political actors, whether as citizens or as politicians. Advocating for women's

political rights was central to the "First Wave" of the feminist movement as it unfolded in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Movement activists around the world – often referred to as "suffragettes" - successfully lobbied for women to gain the right to vote. The first country to grant women the right to vote was New Zealand, in 1893, and suffrage was granted to women in most countries around the world in the 20th century.

Despite the near-universality of political rights, women currently make up only a fifth of representatives in national parliaments around the world, and just over 20 countries have female leaders.  But recent decades have seen significant increases in the presence of women at all levels of political office. The European Commission adoption of gender-mainstreaming since 1996 has increased political opportunities and introduced a gender perspective across a broad range of issue-areas. The implementation of electoral gender quotas in the UK, starting in 1993, led to an increase in the number of women elected to the UK Parliament in Westminster, as well as the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly. Such policies have been successful in boosting the number of elected female representatives in a global context. After the September 2013 elections in Rwanda, the country replaced Sweden at the top of the global chart for women's parliamentary representation: The Rwandan Chamber of Deputies includes 56.3% female representatives. Sweden, in comparison, currently has 47.3% female representatives in its parliament, the *Riksdag*. Women's political participation and representation is not just shaped by formal measures such as gender quotas, but also by each country's history of social movement activism, the broader political culture, and features of the electoral system.

Despite recent advances in the numerical representation of women in politics, it remains a squarely male-dominated arena. In political communication, questions of representation have

been central to understanding how media discourses might perpetuate or challenge existing power relations. Gendered representations imply judgments on femininity and masculinity, constructing ideal conceptions of what politicians are and should be. Historically, women have suffered a 'symbolic annihilation' from the public sphere as the media have focused overwhelmingly on the activities of men (Tuchman, 1981). While it may be inaccurate to claim that women are *absent* from today's coverage of politics, they are systematically under-represented. When women do appear, their voices are routinely marginalized or trivialized. Female politicians are frequently depicted in ways consistent with traditional gender roles – as victims, mothers or wives. Such depictions associate women with essentially feminine traits, including care, compassion and motherliness, placing them firmly in the private sphere. This suggests they may lack the "masculine" qualities such as being tough, aggressive, and assertive – qualities often associated with political competence in dominant discourses (e.g. Ross 2002).

Even if the emergence of social media and other alternative forums may generate new opportunities for candidates to enhance their image, voters remain largely reliant on information garnered from mainstream legacy media. Women seeking political office face difficulties in securing recognition and positive coverage - both of them crucial for electoral success. Coverage of female electoral candidates tends to focus on their private lives, personal characteristics and appearance, whereas male candidates receive more substantial coverage of their policy stands, especially from male reporters (e.g. Devitt 2002). The personalization of politics is linked to a closer relationship between politics and popular culture. On the one hand, links between politics and popular culture have expressed themselves in the politicization of media formats. This includes newer formats such as television talk shows and Reality TV, through which "ordinary women" as well as elected

politicians might be given voice and enabled to discuss issues that might otherwise be neglected in conventional news reporting, including sexuality, domestic violence and reproduction. On the other hand, the personalization of political life contributes to emergence of a "celebrity politics" – one where constructions of politicians draw heavily on the tropes of celebrity culture. The models of feminity associated with celebrity offer limited repertoires of femininity, either strongly sexualized or based on other essentializing identities, such as seductress, mother, or pet (van Zoonen 2006). Delineating and policing the boundary between private and public lives is frequently more of a challenge for female politicians as their political careers battle with private sphere demands, including family and domestic responsibilities.

Nonetheless there are signs that more complex and varied representations are emerging. The examples of Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin, who both ran as prominent candidates for election in the 2008 US presidential election is illustrative here. Hillary Clinton – the wife of former President Bill Clinton - ran as a candidate in the Democratic Party primaries, while Sarah Palin was Republican vice presidential candidate, as the running mate of Senator John McCain. Although on occasion these candidates were presented as historic figures who could finally place women in the highest political offices in the US, the media frequently framed them as figures who either epitomized the ideal standards of good womanhood, motherhood and wifehood, or failed to live up to those standards (e.g. Carlin and Winfrey 2009). Some observers have contended that there were significant *differences* in representations of the two, based on differences in their ideologies and symbolic personae, and that the relatively frequent *neutral* treatment of the gender of candidates may hint at broader transformations.

Similarly complex patterns of gendered representation can be seen around the world. Coverage of Michele Bachelet, in her 2005 bid to become Chile's first female president, called attention to her gender, whereas this was never raised in stories about her male opponents. But she was generally treated positively in horse-race coverage, and there was little discussion of her family and her marital status as a divorcee (Valenzuela and Correa 2009). Reporting on the majority female cabinet of Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero after the 2008 elections focused on personal attributes of female ministers. Carme Chacón – whom the media were quick to describe as petite, young and attractive - was pregnant when she was the first woman appointed Minister of Defence in Spain. Media focused on the exceptionality of this appointment, particularly given the traditionally very masculine understanding of the ministry.

Such challenges are typical of those facing female politicians seeking to attract positive media coverage (Ross 2009). Though some strategies have proven successful, engaging in attention-grabbing behavior, wearing bright or sexualized clothing or acting aggressively also carry risks in undermining a focus on policy and substance (Ross 2002). Bulgarian media coverage of female politicians showed broader patterns of gender stereotyping detected elsewhere, but one candidate - Meglena Kuneva - a high-profile academic and policy analyst in Bulgaria who was already well established as a "serious" political actor received relatively favorable coverage (Ibroscheva and Raicheva-Stover 2009). Such complexities suggest a broader change away from automatic assumptions of a gender bias. With more gender-balanced legislatures, the role of women politicians has reached some degree of normalization of the role of women politicians, with a corresponding growth in policy substance over gendered and essentialist representations.

Despite the emphasis on gendered representations of female politicians, an important corrective focuses on how gendered demands also place burdens on male politicians. Just as essentialist constructions of female politicians may sexualize or confine them to maternal roles, male politicians must contend with the norms of hegemonic masculinity: They must be strong, manly, assertive and decisive, successful fathers, accomplished athletes and plausible military chiefs. Constructions of hegemonic masculinity – like those of femininity – are dynamic, contingent and subject to historical change. Male and female candidates now must demonstrate emotional intelligence, whether speaking frankly about their feelings or crying on the campaign trail. George W. Bush won kudos for his openness about his battle with alcoholism in the 2000 US Presidential Election, and Hilllary Clinton broke into tears during the New Hampshire Primary in 2008.

The gender of news reporters and editors also relates to the presence and representation of women in political news. Newspapers with a high percentage of female editors appear not to differentiate between male and female reporters when assigning beats and stories, but in male-dominated newsrooms, more men get assigned to cover political stories (Craft and Wanta 2004). Despite a pattern of male dominance in news stories, female reporters are more likely to draw on female sources than their male counterparts. But the gender of journalists makes little difference in the broader context of newsroom cultures that remain pervaded by masculine values.

The presence of women politicians may make a difference to political life, as women politicians appear to have a different style of politics. In the British context, female Members of Parliament are more likely to advance gender-related concerns, including health,

education, child care and equality, and sometimes perceive themselves as advocates for women in policy debates and politicians (Lovenduski and Norris 1996; Ross 2002). Women politicians believe their presence introduces a different working style, advancing "a kinder, gentler politics" (Norris 1996:93) which places greater emphasis on collaboration and consensus rather than conflict and hierarchy.

In political institutions with greater representation of female politicians, they are better able to shape the policy agenda. For male *and* female politicians, gender makes a difference in the substance of policy, but also in style and process. Voters tend to view female politicians as more caring, honest and hardworking, among other positive attributes. But "masculine traits" continue to be valued in electoral decision-making.

In a dynamic future environment, increasing participation by and representation of women has accompanied less salient role for gender in representation. Beyond the automatic assumption of a gendered bias in representation and practice may lie an understanding of the ideological and symbolic nuances of the gendered construction of male and female politicians.

SEE ALSO: Celebrity politics; Candidate, Political; Feminist Theory; Popular Culture

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