



International Workshop on Ideologies, Values and Political Behaviors
in Central and Eastern Europe

The impact of descriptive representation on substantive representation of women at European and national parliamentary levels. Case Study: Romania

Emanuela Simona Garboni^{*}

^aWest University of Timișoara, bld. V. Pârvan, 4, 300223, Timișoara, România

^bVrije Universiteit Brussel, Pleinlaan 5, 1050, Brussel, Belgium

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the consequences of the level of descriptive representation of women in the National Parliament (NP) and European Parliament (EP) on the substantive representation of women. In the achievement of this endeavour, first, I have examined the legislative initiatives of the NP in the period January 2012 - June 2014. Second, I have examined the activity of the Romanian delegation in the plenary of the EP in the 2009 – 2014 legislature. The findings show that Romanian women members of the EP, corresponding to 36% of the Romanian delegation in the analyzed period, were more active as regards women's substantive representation than their Romanian male colleagues. Contrariwise, in the NP women are descriptively underrepresented (11,71 %) and neither them, nor their male colleagues are particularly active regarding the substantive representation of women.

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Peer review under the responsibility of the West University of Timisoara.

Keywords: women; descriptive representation; substantive representation; European Parliament; National Parliament; Romania.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to investigate the consequences of women's descriptive representation (DRW) on the substantive representation of women (SRW) at national and European parliamentary levels. Legislative

^{*} E-mail address: egarboni@vub.ac.be

representation has a major importance in a democracy, as legislation has both direct and indirect effects on citizens life. The underrepresentation of a certain group in decision making positions is considered a democratic problem of justice, legitimacy, responsiveness and effectiveness (Philips 1995). Women represent 52% of Romania's population and they are more qualified than men for top political positions, as they represent more than 70% of the graduates and about 60% of the PhDs in political science, European studies, law, public administration, economy, management, sociology, and communication sciences. Despite their high qualifications and being more than half of the population, women stay for only 11,71% in the National Parliament. Therefore, women do not constitute a minority group, but a marginalized group.

The political class of the last two decades is in the greatest part constituted by men and women's issues did not represent a priority on their agenda. Moreover, there are not any prominent organizations or movements at the level of civil society to foster women's descriptive or substantive representation. The only exception that could be mentioned is, arguably, at the academic level, where a new generation of scholars with gender and feminist concerns is raising in the last years. Unfortunately, they do not increase the awareness of civil society regarding women's political representation.

The inquiry whether DRW affects SRW occupies a central position in the study of women's political representation, and the empirical findings are diverse. The studies vary from those which establish a correlation between women's numerical presence in legislatures and the SRW (Celis 2006; Mansbridge 1999; Wängnerud 2009), to others which reveal insignificant differences between the acts and behaviours of female and male legislators (Childs and Krook 2009).

In the achievement of this endeavour I have focused on the activities of the Romanian members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and the members of the National Parliament (MNPs). Although an assessment of women's situation in politics at regional level is also important, it nevertheless falls outside the scope of the present work.

2. Research context and concepts. Descriptive and substantive representation of women

In this study I will focus on descriptive and substantive representation as defined by Hanna Pitkin in her seminal work *The Concept of Representation* (1967). Pitkin identifies there four types of representation: formalistic, descriptive, symbolic and substantive. The formalistic representation is defined as the formal bestowing of authority onto a person to act for others. This form is problematic because all the actions of the representatives count as 'representation', regardless of their quality. Descriptive representation indicates the correspondence between the characteristics of the represented and the representatives. According to Pitkin, this concept is limited because it emphasizes the composition of a political institution rather than its activities. Symbolic representation, instead, deals with the beliefs and attitudes of the represented. The disadvantage of these notions is the vulnerability to manipulation by representatives, and the tendency to involve arbitrary images. As the first three forms of representation do not deal with the crucial aspect of 'what is going on during representation' (Pitkin 1969: 9), she considers the substantive representation, defined as 'acting for' or 'acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them' (Pitkin 1967: 209) as the most important. In contrast to the other three concepts, in the case of substantive representation the representatives have to be responsive to the represented and not the contrary. Among the four forms of representation established by Pitkin, descriptive and substantive representation (and the relations that could be established between them) are the most extensively investigated by gender and politics, and feminist scholarship (Childs and Lovenduski 2013: 491).

Issues regarding women's representation were addressed by political scientists (mostly feminists) only toward the end of the twentieth century, with the emergence of gender and politics scholarship. Until recently, the main concern on the topic of women's political representation was linked to women's numerical presence in parliaments, or 'descriptive' underrepresentation. Many countries have made efforts to increase the number of women representatives, and the sex quota (either reserved seats, legislative quotas or party quotas) was the most frequent method used. These strategies have had successful results over the years in certain countries, and consequently it raised also the variety of questions to be asked regarding women's representation.

The SRW started to be investigated especially during the last decade and in its study could be established three phases: first, scholarship evolved around the study of the relations that could be empirically established between women's descriptive representation in certain institutions (generally in legislatures) and the representation of

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