



Discussing women's representation in local politics in Turkey: The case of female mayorship



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to explicate women's political representation in female mayorship in Turkey's local politics on the basis of the empirical data gathered from in-depth interviews with female mayors elected in 2004 and 2009 local elections. The objective is to construe women's representation in local politics with the concern that due to the "positional power" of a female mayor, women's representation in a municipality is not congenial to women's representation in the parliament. The contention of the article is that women's representation in female mayorship can be explicated by symbolic, accessible, and just representation.

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Descriptive representation matters because of what it symbolizes to us in terms of citizenship and inclusion – What it conveys to us about who does and who does not count as a full member of society.

[Phillips 2012: 516]

1. Introduction

The extensive body of literature on gender and politics has concentrated on the subject of women's political participation and representation. The initial concern here is to attract attention to underrepresentation of women in politics, particularly in legislative bodies, which constitutes a serious legitimacy problem for a functioning democracy.¹ Supporting this concern, "the politics of presence" theory of Phillips (1995) is based on the claim that women's interests are better represented by women themselves and equality concerning political representation is a requirement due to power and gender inequality reasons. The assumption here is that women have

different interests from men and if the number of women in politics increases, representation of women's interests will also increase (Leyenaar, 2004: 2–3; Caiazza, 2004; Sapiro, 1981).²

It should be noted that most empirical studies on the issue of women's political representation (both descriptive and substantive) have dealt with national representation in legislative bodies by counting the number of roll call voting or earmark requests for women's issues submitted by women representatives.³ Based on these studies, it can be asserted that women's political representation is generally regarded as a matter of their access to national politics and decision-making process as female parliamentarians; their representation in local politics is mostly ignored. However, a broader perspective of politics and political representation requires questioning and examining underrepresentation/representation problems of women in local politics as female

² Leyenaar mentions three categories of women's objective interests. These are interests concerning matters of gender equality in politics; interests concerning matters of gender equality in labor; and interests concerning biological differences between men and women (2004: 3). This study is related to this first category, regarding political representation and participation of women.

³ For conceptual and case studies on women's descriptive and substantive representation in parliament (legislative representation), see Ansolabehere & Jones, 2010; Ayata & Tütüncü, 2008; Bauer & Britton, 2006; Bühlmann & Schadel, 2012; Celis, 2006; Devlin & Elgie, 2008; Kenworthy & Malami, 1999; Krook, 2010; Lee, 2015; Matland, 1998; Rai, 1997; Russell, Mackay, & McAllister, 2002; Sawyer, 2000; Sawyer, Tremblay, & Trimble, 2006; Saxonberg, 2000; Schulze, 2013: 138–158; Tremblay, 1998, 2012; Wängnerud, 2009.

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¹ See Caiazza, 2004; Celis, 2008: 71–93; Childs & Lovenduski, 2013: 489–513; Kenworthy & Malami, 1999; Norris, 1985; Paxton, Hughes, & Painter, 2010; Sapiro, 1981; Sawyer, 2000; Saxonberg, 2000.

mayors and members of local councils.⁴ It is vital to do so due to the “positional power” (Weldon, 2003) of female mayors; as the head of municipalities,⁵ female mayors can act as “critical actors” and make a difference (Bowman & Keanery, 1993) in terms of adopting policies, and prioritizing women's interests and concerns. As Phillips contends, underpinning the “politics of presence” is the idea that women do not need somebody to speak for them but one of their own speaking for them, sharing broadly their experiences (Phillips, 1991, 1995).

The purpose of this article is thus to explore what women's political representation as female mayors denotes in local politics of Turkey on the basis of data gathered from in-depth interviews with 34 female mayors elected in the 2004 and 2009 local elections and the activity reports and publications of municipalities they ruled. Such a study deserves attention for two reasons. Firstly, though there are valuable studies on women and local politics in Turkey, there is rare work with a specific focus on women's representation in female mayors' experiences.⁶ Secondly, the highly male-dominated character of local politics in Turkey both in qualitative and quantitative (with around 1% of representation being female)⁷ terms makes it vital to examine women's representation at this level. Despite the significance of women's underrepresentation in Turkey's local politics, the goal here is not to examine the factors behind this underrepresentation. Rather, the intention here is to construe women's representation in local politics with the concern that due to the “positional power” of a female mayor, women's representation in a municipality is not congenial to women's representation in the parliament. This is especially notable for the political presence of a female mayor in terms of justice and spatial accessibility because local governance and politics are designed as micro-scaled politics to provide local-based facilities in Turkey. Thus, the contention of the article is that, based on the empirical data derived from the field research in Turkey, women's representation in female mayorship can be explicated by a) the symbolic value of representation; b) accessible representation; and c) just representation.

This article consists of three parts. In the first part, a brief overview of literature on women's political representation is discussed. In the second part, the design and methodology of the research is introduced. In the third part, findings of the field study concerning the empirical data based on the experiences of female mayors in Turkey elected in 2004 and 2009 local elections about women's representation in local politics are provided. The article ends up with remarks on the limitations and prospects of discussing women's representation in local politics in the case of female mayorship in Turkey.

2. Contextualizing women's representation

Indeed, the literature on women's political representation aiming to trace whether women's existence in politics makes a difference for women is inspired by Hanna Pitkin's pioneering conceptualization of representation wherein she defined four types of representation: formalistic, descriptive, symbolic, and substantive (1967). The most attractive part of this conceptualization for feminist scholars derives from a distinction between descriptive and substantive representation; whereas substantive representation or “acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them”, is valued over descriptive

representation, “standing for a group by virtue of sharing similar characteristics such as race, gender, ethnicity; not acting for them” (Pitkin, 1967: 209). Thus, most recent studies on women's political representation are dominated by attempts either rethinking substantive representation (Celis, Childs, Kantola, & Krook, 2008; Mackay, 2008) or finding out the complicated relationship between descriptive and substantive representation (Celis, 2009; Childs, 2006; Childs & Lovenduski, 2013); whether an increase in descriptive representation of women automatically leads to an increase in substantive representation of women and/or vice versa.⁸ In the final analysis, a clear-cut linear relationship cannot be supported due to the “integrated character of representation” (Schwindt-Bayer & Mishler, 2005).

Weldon (2002) and Mackay (2008) went beyond these discussions by attracting attention to the limits of scrutinizing women's political representation only in individual representative terms. In her “thick conception of substantive representation, Fiona Mackay develops “a whole-system approach” and questions the studies focusing solely on female representatives to see whether they act for women. Rather she proposes to thicken the conception of substantive representation by taking into account “the actors, relationships, interactions, institutions, and norms” in which the representation process takes place while not disregarding the significance of parliamentary spaces and representatives (Mackay, 2008: 125, 131). On the basis of our findings, we agree with her arguments that the capacity of female representatives can be limited to institutional and political party factors, and it is very hard to talk about a fixed and unified female identity and to claim that all female representatives need to be feminist (Mackay, 2008: 127). But still, we believe that the presence of women in politics to express themselves is a need because as Phillips underlines, “descriptive representation is not just a tool for achieving better substantive representation”; it is critical as a symbol for showing who counts as a citizen (Phillips, 2012: 517). In this vein, although descriptive representation is not sufficient on its own, its essence cannot be overlooked. Additionally, although Mackay claims to take a broader view in her schema and we believe, taking parliaments and legislative activity as institutional factors affecting women's representation is essential, still, women's representation here is restricted to national representation. As Weldon (2002) points out, discussions of democratic representation should include different sites of political representation and we believe that local politics is one such site at which women's representation should be scrutinized. Thus, when investigating the implication of women's representation in female mayorship, we based our analysis on the Phillips' and Fraser's conceptualization of women's representation that might provide valuable insights for understanding the pivotal role of women's representation in local politics.

When we take a look at the issue of women's representation in Turkey, there have been significant numbers of studies particularly since 1990s. These studies have mostly examined the place and role of women particularly in the general elections, parliament and in political parties and revealed the obstacles women faced in national politics (Arat, 1985; Çakır, 2005; Tekeli, 1979; Talaslı, 1996; Terzioğlu, 2010; Matland & Tezcür, 2011; Ünal Erzen, 2011; Yaraman, 1999). There have also been important works on women's national representation in Turkey which aimed to analyze the demographic profiles and the political activities of the female parliamentarians to see the main perceptions and obstacles for the inclusion of women into national politics (Arat, 1989, 1998a, 1998b; Ayata, 1995, 1998; Aydemir & Aydemir, 2011; Çakır, 2013; Dinç, 2002; Kasapoğlu & Özerkmen, 2013). In addition to these, one can come across works targeting to attract attention to develop necessary policies to increase the participation of women at the national level (Bilhan & Tek, 2011; Çağlar, 2011; Sancar Üşür, 1997; Sancar, 2008).

⁸ For detailed discussions on women's political representation, see Alexander, 2012; Bühlmann & Schadel, 2012; Celis & Childs, 2008; Childs & Lovenduski, 2013; Curtin, 2012; Fraser, 2004; Jones, 2014; Mansbridge, 2005; Murray, 2008; Phillips, 2012; Uhlner, 2012.

⁴ For a few studies on women in local politics, see Alkan, 2009; Childs & Cowley, 2011: 1–19; Evertzen, 2011.

⁵ The organizational structure of a municipality in Turkey is composed of three organs as the mayor, the municipal council and the municipal committee. There can also be various commissions and local councils working under the municipal organization formed in accordance with the needs of the municipality.

⁶ For a number of significant studies on women in local politics in Turkey from different angles, see Alkan, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2009; Arıkboğa, 2009; Bora & İşat, 2006; Bozkurt & Bozkurt, 2014; Cindoğlu, 2011; Çaha & Çaha, 2012; Koyuncu Lorasdağı & Sumbas, 2015; Negiz, 2008; Negiz & Üçer, 2012; Senol, 2009; Tokman & Kendirci, 2006.

⁷ For the official statistics about local elections in Turkey, see http://www.migm.gov.tr/Dokumanlar/cinsiyetlerine_gore_secilmis_sayilari.pdf.

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