



Talking about my generation and class? Unpacking the descriptive representation of women in Asian parliaments



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SYNOPSIS

Since women (like men) differ in their interests and perspectives, we argue, that studies of the descriptive representation of women in politics ought to consider not only how many women are elected, but also which segments of the female population are proportionally represented and under-represented. Applying this framework to new data on the demographic characteristics of over 4000 members of parliament from sixteen countries in Asia, we find female MPs typically unrepresentative of their country's female populations at the pivotal intersections of social class and generation. With few exceptions, the majority of women (those who are young, elderly, in working-class occupations, and with average levels of education) are highly under-represented despite considerable variation across countries in electoral systems, quotas for female representation, and levels of socio-economic development. These findings raise interesting questions and offer new avenues for future research on the descriptive representation and substantive representation of women in politics.

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Introduction

The under-representation of women in national parliaments has led scholars and activists to explore how to increase the presence of women in politics (descriptive representation of women) and under what conditions female representatives can make a difference in improving the lives of women (substantive representation of women). However, the majority of studies on women's descriptive representation thus far have only examined numbers (or proportions) of women in political office rather than asking what kinds of women are elected. But determining which women hold office is an essential prerequisite to understanding how the presence of women in politics affects their representation. It is this gap in the literature, which we address in this study.

Since women are a heterogeneous group we believe it is important to ask which women are elected in order to understand what kinds of women's interests are being

represented. To do so, we make use of a new dataset on the members of parliament (MPs) from sixteen countries in Asia to identify what kinds of women are included and excluded. Focusing specifically on generational and social class attributes of female representatives, we ask how the composition of elected women along these two identity markers affects both the descriptive representation and substantive representation of women.

Literature review

The distinction between descriptive representation and substantive representation goes back to the classic work of Hanna Pitkin (1967) who emphasized that the former does not always lead to the latter. Concerning the descriptive representation of women, most research has concentrated on how many women are in politics and which factors explain their presence in elected office (Wängnerud, 2009). Typically, three sets of macro-level variables have been evoked to explain women's under-representation: institutional, socio-economic, and cultural ones. Regarding the first, proportional

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electoral systems (e.g. Kennworthy & Malami, 1999; Rule, 1994) and a high district magnitude (number of seats in an electoral district) appear to facilitate the election of women as does a higher party magnitude (the number of seats a party can expect to win in a district) (Matland, 2005; Welch & Studlar, 1990). Studies have likewise found that ideologically leftist parties typically have more women in their ranks than conservative parties (Caul, 2001; Kennworthy & Malami, 1999; Norris, 2001) and the adoption of electoral gender quotas by political parties either voluntarily or as required by statutory or constitutional law in the form of candidate quotas or reserved seats can increase the share of women in elected office as well (Krook, 2010; Tripp & Kang, 2008).

Culture, especially dominant attitudes in society towards women's appropriate roles, equally impacts whether women are seen as viable political candidates (Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Ruedin, 2012). In societies where much of the population expects women to serve primarily as wives and caregivers, we generally find fewer women in political office than in more gender egalitarian countries where women are encouraged to pursue public careers (Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Kunovich & Paxton, 2005; Reynolds, 1999). Individual-level factors also have an impact on the supply of female candidates for political office. Parliamentary candidates often have professional careers in higher status occupations (such as law, business, journalism, education, and the civil service) that "provide the career flexibility, financial resources, occupational security, and work conditions which facilitate the pursuit of a political career" (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995: 247). Since many women are trapped in lower status occupations, employed part-time, or perform unpaid caring responsibilities in the home, they frequently have fewer resources such as time, money, networks, and emotional support to launch and maintain a successful political career (Rueschemeyer & Schissler, 1990).

Whereas research on descriptive representation has focused primarily on numbers of women in office, studies of substantive representation have asked whether and under what conditions the presence of women in politics actually makes a difference (Celis & Childs, 2008; Childs & Krook, 2009; Schwindt-Bayer & Mishler, 2005). The putative link between the presence of women and the representation of women's interests is most clearly put forward by Anne Phillips (1995) in her *politics of presence* argument implying that men alone can neither accurately nor adequately represent women's interests as a whole. While the concept of women's interest is contested (Childs, Webb, & Marthaler, 2010; Squires, 2008), research has confirmed that women's policy priorities are indeed distinct from men. For example, Thomas (1991) showed that female representatives in US state legislatures emphasize family, children, and women's issues more frequently than men. Female representatives have likewise initiated more debates about women's issues and have been twice as likely to support feminist and pro-equality measures as men in several countries (Chaney, 2011; Piscopo, 2011; Swers, 2005). Women have also sponsored or co-sponsored more bills addressing women's issues (Saint-Germain, 1989; Swers, 2005; Taylor-Robinson & Heath, 2003).

There seems to be considerable support for the assertion that women in politics do represent women but the literature

remains divided over which factors foster the substantive representation of women. One approach has focused on the concept of "critical mass" (Dahlerup, 1988; Kanter, 1977) which argues that women must comprise at least 15% or 30% of the parliament to affect changes in a legislature's culture, procedures, and policy outcomes. Yet, empirical studies have been inconclusive on the role of a critical mass in furthering the substantive representation of women as well as the exact threshold that is necessary for a critical mass to be effective (Beckwith, 2007; Beckwith & Cowell-Meyers, 2007; Grey, 2006; Studlar & McAllister, 2002; Wängnerund, 2009). As the critical mass effect is more probabilistic than deterministic, Childs and Krook (2009) have argued in favor of studying how, instead of when, women make a difference.

The "how" question of substantive representation naturally leads us to consider the particular institutional and political context in which women are embedded. For example, cross-national research has shown that the presence of women's caucuses or women's machineries positively influences the substantive representation of women (e.g. Celis & Childs, 2008; Holli, 2008; Mazur, 2002; Sawer, 2012). Likewise, women's positional power, i.e. their presence in cabinets or key positions on parliamentary committees can influence their ability to push for women-friendly policies (Annesley & Gains, 2010; Heath, Schwindt-Bayer, & Taylor-Robinson, 2005; Swers, 2005). Equally, in many societies, women's movements have been important in pushing for the substantive representation of women (Beckwith & Cowell-Meyers, 2007; Dahlerup, 2006). Focusing on the role of individual women and their ability to further the substantive representation of women, the critical actor perspective argues that one needs to analyze individual women rather than the number of women. Critical actors can be defined as "those who initiate policy proposals on their own, even when women form a small minority, and embolden others to take steps to promote policies for women, regardless of the proportion of female representatives" (Childs & Krook, 2009: 528). Supporting this perspective, research has shown that even a small number of women can make a difference in gendered discourse and outcomes. Often, these critical actors share backgrounds as activists or held senior positions in women's organizations prior to becoming politicians (Annesley & Gains, 2010; Chaney, 2006).

Which women matters

To summarize, the "descriptive" and "substantive" strands of the representation literature focus primarily on (a) the overall number of women in parliament and (b) their behavior once they enter parliament. What they have largely failed to do is to ask *what kind of women* are included and excluded from political office. As such, these early studies on descriptive representation and substantive representation tend to treat women as black boxes instead of asking who these women are, how they differ from each other, and what this means for the quality of women's substantive representation, i.e. the breadth of women's interests represented in parliament (Celis, 2009).

Fortunately, recent theoretical developments on the substantive representation of women have focused more closely on specific women and their actions, especially the discourse on intersectionality (Cho, Williams, & McCall, 2013).

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