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Women's authority in political decision-making groups

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ABSTRACT

Formal decision-making groups are ubiquitous, and they make decisions that govern every aspect of life, yet women are vastly underrepresented in them. How effective are women in these groups, where their numbers still lag far behind men's? We address this longstanding question, focusing on detailed measures of women's influence in natural and controlled settings. The answers shed light on related questions as well: How high do the numbers have to rise before women exercise equal influence? Do women need a different critical mass in different types of settings? We also address a newer question: how do other features of the group help or hinder women's equal leadership? Can they ameliorate the negative impact of low numbers? Women's relative number matters to women's ability to exercise leadership in small groups, but the procedures that groups use also matter, and condition the effects of numbers.

1. Introduction

In the immediate aftermath of President Barack Obama's re-election, in January 2013, the *New York Times* ran a front-page story critical of the president's "all-male inner circle" and featuring a photo of the president surrounded entirely by male advisors (*New York Times* 1/2013). The story generated a flurry of negative coverage for the Obama administration. Shortly after, the White House provided a different photo, showing the president surrounded by a substantial number of women advisors. The outcry over women's absence and the quick response to demonstrate sensitivity to women's inclusion are telling. Clearly, many now perceive women's presence in these and other groups of decision-makers as an important characteristic of a legitimate political system – indeed, as a necessary requirement of democracy.

A global movement to put women in official positions has contributed to these norms of democratic representation for women. The UN and other international governance organizations have formally issued calls for equal female representation in decision-making bodies, and the European Union and many of its member countries have legislated minimum quotas for women on various government and corporate boards (Baldez, 2004; Beckwith, 2003; Dahlerup, 2006, 2012; Franceschet, Krook, & Piscopo, 2012a; Krook, 2009; Norris, 2006; Pande & Ford, 2011).

While these norms have come hand in hand with growing numbers of women in decision-making groups, the numbers still lag far behind men's. For example, the US Congress has ten times the number of women that it had in the 1960s, but women still compose only 20% of US Senators and 19% of US Representatives (Center for American Women and Politics, 2015b). At the subnational level, women make up only 24% of US state legislators – a significant increase over the 5% average in 1971 or the 15% average in 1985, but still well below parity. In only two states – Colorado and Vermont – do women account for more

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than 40% of state legislators, and in fully half the states, women occupy less than 20% of legislative seats (Center for American Women and Politics, 2015a). These percentages are similar in US city and county councils (Crowder-Meyer, 2010). And worldwide, the situation is not much different: the average is only 20–25% (Karpowitz & Mendelberg, 2014, chap. 1).[1]

What difference do these percentages make in decision-making groups? How high do the numbers have to rise before we see equal influence? Can women exercise influence equally with men despite low numbers? And more importantly for our purposes, how do other features of the group or social context regulate the impact of numbers on women's ability to exercise leadership, influence, and authority?

We argue that women can exercise and build influence through at least two channels: equal participation in the discussion and experiencing equal affirmation while speaking. The more that women engage in these behaviors, the more they influence others and the more women's influence cumulates to authority, which is perhaps the core characteristic of leadership. Authority is the expectation of influence, and the more often women instantiate influence, the more they build authority.

Additionally, our argument is that women's influence can shape group dynamics and outcomes. Women can participate and influence equally with men, and when they do, they also tend to articulate some views that differ from men's views. Groups where women exercise equal influence do tend to make different decisions from groups where women do not exercise such influence. And groups in which women participate actively, advocate for their distinctive perspectives, and help move the group's collective decision also have effects that spill over beyond the immediate discussion at hand: women in these groups build their store of authority. Influence thus begets leadership.

However, the bad news is that the mere presence of women does not consistently lead to these felicitous outcomes. Just because women are at the table does not mean they exercise their voice or that they are heard. Specifically, the bad news consists of two parts. First, in the type of setting common in politics, where dynamics are adversarial and women are few, women are often far less influential. Second, when women are many, they do not always carry equal influence with men in the group (nor with scarce men in other groups).

But the good news is that in large part, this gender inequality can be corrected under the right discussion rules and procedural norms. This is what institutional arrangements can do for equality – they can affect how people interact and thus how much voice and influence women have. These rules can help women exercise voice and influence, which builds their authority and allows them to exercise leadership down the line. All this matters for the very nature of democratic decision-making, because when women are not full leaders, the discussion and ultimately the decision fail to represent the distinctive priorities of half the world's population.

This argument applies not only to government officials, but also to any formal decision-making group. Many people take part in meetings where individuals gather to make collective decisions (Karpowitz, 2006). In fact, the meeting is a backbone not only of democracy, but of everyday life.[2] Meetings are a key way in which people interact and make decisions. The role that women play in meetings matters, therefore, for women's authority and leadership in society, writ large.

2. The literature on representation: Why does women's presence matter?

In conceptualizing women's influence in formal settings it is useful to rely on concepts developed in the literature on political representation (see, for example, Mansbridge, 1999; Pitkin, 1967). The first concept is *symbolic representation*, which refers to general respect, dignity, and authority. One important way that women's presence in formal decision-making matters is by shaping the perception that women are competent to make decisions, that women are well suited to exercise power. When women are under-represented in decision-making, that reinforces stereotypes of women as less capable, and less authoritative. These stereotypes affect not only people's impressions of women leaders, but also their views of women in general. If women don't participate in public affairs, then they will not be viewed as worthy of being listened to in other areas of life – settings such as marriage, the workplace, and voluntary associations such as clubs, committees, community boards, and so on. As Sapiro wrote, when women are not represented in government, women become "subjects" rather than "citizens" (1983). Women's full participation and representation in decision-making affects the level of basic human dignity and respect accorded to women as a social category. Thus, a dearth of women in leadership matters because it undermines women's overall "symbolic representation" in society – the perception that women deserve equal authority and equal status.

A second important concept is *substantive representation*. This type of influence is another reason why women's presence matters. Women and men tend to have some different priorities. Though gender roles have changed, women are still more involved than men in care-giving (Parker & Wang, 2013). As a result, women tend to place more weight on human needs and the needs of vulnerable populations – the populations that they are disproportionately expected to care for. If women are not fully present and fully represented in decision-making, then those priorities will not get a full hearing. Society expects and channels women from an early age to orient to the care of others, so it is no surprise that women tend to go into college majors and occupations that involve health, education, psychology, or social work. Despite strides toward gender diversity, many of these occupations are still

[1] In only 26% of countries do women exceed 30% of the lower chamber of the national according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (downloaded 8/14/15, http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm).The percentage of women on U.S. corporate boards has been stuck at around 19% for almost a decade (through 2014), while the percentage of female chief executives is even lower, at around 15%, according to figures by Catalyst (Catalyst, 2013; Dhir, 2015; Swanson, 2014).

[2] A fact noted long ago by the French observer Alexis de Tocqueville (2006, 249–250).