Representation

RETHINKING WOMEN'S SUBSTANTIVE REPRESENTATION

Karen Celis; Sarah Childs; Johanna Kantola; Mona Lena Krook

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This article seeks to rethink how scholars have traditionally studied women's substantive representation. It outlines a framework that aims to replace questions like 'Do women represent women?' with ones like 'Who claims to act for women?' and 'Where, how, and why does the substantive representation of women occur?' Arguing that representation occurs both inside and outside legislative arenas, the article calls attention to the wide range of actors, sites, goal, and means that inform processes of substantive representation.

Introduction

Issues of political representation are a core focus of research on gender and politics. Although widely regarded as having a number of dimensions—formal, descriptive, substantive and symbolic (Pitkin 1967; cf. Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005)—most feminist work on the topic focuses on descriptive and substantive representation and the ways in which these two forms of representation may be linked (Phillips 1995; Young 2000; Carroll 2001). In particular, scholars ask whether an increase in the number of female representatives (women's descriptive representation) results in an increase in attention to women's policy concerns (women's substantive representation). Recent work criticises this approach on two grounds. First, the focus on female representatives ignores important differences among women, at the same time that it overlooks men as potential actors on behalf of women as a group (Childs and Krook 2006; see also Celis 2008b, this issue). Second, the focus on policy change formulated and approved by members of parliament limits substantive representation to one set of actors and a single site and mode of political representation (Weldon 2002; Lovenduski et al. 2005; Celis 2006).

In this article, we draw on and extend these insights to develop a new approach to analysing the multiple possible actors, sites, goals, and means that inform processes of substantive representation. In the case of gender and politics research, we suggest shifting the terms of debate from traditional questions like 'Do women represent women?' or 'Do women in politics make a difference?' to questions like 'Who claims to act for women?' and 'Where, why, and how does substantive representation of women (SRW) occur?' While seemingly similar, these approaches differ considerably. The former assumes that only women can substantively represent women, that substantive representation occurs only in elected political bodies, and that SRW requires that women be 'distinct' in some way from men (see Cowell-Meyers 2001). The core assumption is that 'numbers matter': an increase in women's descriptive representation in parliaments will generally—even automatically— translate into an increase in SRW. The latter, in contrast, leaves open the question of who might act on women's issues, where substantive representation might take place, and

what the substantive representation of women might entail. It thus does not presume that the SRW requires a 'critical mass' of women, but rather explores the many ways in which 'critical actors' in various locations may seek to promote what they regard as women's concerns.

To elaborate this alternative research agenda, we begin in the first section by reviewing features of the 'mainstream' literature on political representation, which treats 'representation' as a relatively straightforward and even static process, as well as recent efforts to rethink representation in terms of more fluid and dynamic processes of claims-making. In the second section, we turn to the feminist literature. We discuss two strands of research that are rarely viewed together in debates over women's representation—studies of women's legislative behaviour and work on state feminism—and then draw on an approach implicitly developed by numerous scholars to make a case for joining these insights to recognise a broader field of representation practices. In the third section, we pull these various elements together to present a new conceptual framework for theorising and analysing SRW. To this end, we outline four guiding questions for empirical investigation focused on who acts in SRW, where SRW occurs, why SRW is attempted, and how SRW is expressed. The main advantage of this approach is that it enables a more agnostic definition of SRW, which leaves its content open for exploration rather than requiring that it be defined a priori by researchers, who in the process, may overlook the diverse ways in which actors work within and across locations to articulate various visions of what it might mean to act for 'women' as a group.

Mainstream Theories of Political Representation

Most theoretical and empirical studies of political representation begin with Hanna Pitkin's seminal work, *The Concept of Representation* (1967). She identifies four types of representation, but contends that three of these—formalistic, descriptive, and symbolic—are limited. In her view, substantive representation—what she often refers to as 'acting for' representation—is the one true type. She defines formalistic representation as the formal bestowing of authority onto a person to act for others. The problem with this conception is that while representatives are held to account for what they do, all of their actions count as 'representation', regardless of the quality of their interventions as they occur. Descriptive representation denotes the correspondence between the characteristics of the representatives and the represented. The poverty of this notion, according to Pitkin, is its emphasis on the composition of a political institution rather than its activities, because individuals cannot be held to account for 'who they are' but only for 'what they have done'. Symbolic representation, in turn, resides largely in the attitudes and beliefs of the represented. The downside of this conception is that it is not only open to manipulation by representatives, but it also tends to involve images that are largely arbitrary and thus have little or no real meaning.

In contrast to these three facets, substantive representation captures a relationship between the represented and representative in which the represented are 'logically prior', whereby the representatives must be responsive to the represented and not the other way around. In most circumstances, this implies that that the wishes of the represented and the actions of the representative will converge (Pitkin 1967, 163–165). However, this congruency can be realised in two ways. First, the represented may give the representative a mandate clearly stipulating what they should do, which transforms the representative

into a delegate with no independence. Second, the represented may empower the representative to act on their behalf, which empowers the representative to act as an independent trustee. Pitkin argues that representatives should behave as delegates in instances where the representative and the represented are considered to have equal capacities; when political issues are more linked with personal preferences, thereby making objective, rational deliberation less appropriate; when personal and local interests are opposed to national interests; and when representation involves criticising government and policy. Conversely, they should act as trustees in cases where the representative is considered to be superior in wisdom and experience to the represented, political problems are regarded as having clear and objective solutions which can be defined through rational investigation, and national interests as a whole are stressed.

The distinction between delegates and trustees has informed an enormous literature on political representation. However, it has recently been criticised by several scholars on the grounds that it assumes a relatively static notion of interests as entities that exist 'out there', ready to be brought into the representational process (Saward 2006). These accounts stress instead the importance of 'creative' acts that unfold over time as the representative and the represented respond to one another in an iterative fashion. In a recent contribution, Jane Mansbridge (2003) identifies three further concepts of representation, which she labels gyroscopic, surrogate, and anticipatory. In gyroscopic representation, the representative 'looks within'—perhaps to interests, 'common sense', or principles derived from his or her own background—to formulate a basis for action. Surrogate representation, in contrast, occurs when legislators represent constituents beyond their own territorial districts, whose values or identities they nonetheless share. Anticipatory representation, finally, refers to cases where representatives focus on what they *think* their constituents will approve at the next election, not on what they promised to do at the last election (Mansbridge 2003, 515). This last conception presents a particularly dynamic view of what representation 'is', namely a process of construction by representatives who act to please the represented at a later moment in time—i.e., at '$T+2$'. If this construction is accepted by the represented, they may register their approval by re-electing the representative. Crucially, this decision may be based on either the representative having correctly assessed the interests of the represented at $T+2$, or alternatively, the representative having transformed the perceptions of the represented as to what their interests are at $T+2$.

Michael Saward (2006) develops this 'creative' aspect of representation one step further. He advocates a 'basic shift' towards understanding representation in terms of 'representative claims' (2006, 298), which are utilised by would-be representatives to forge a distinction between themselves and the represented. These 'claims to be representative' can be made by a variety of actors, which may include elected politicians but also 'interest group or NGO figures, local figures, rock stars, [and] celebrities' (2006, 306). From this perspective, traditional notions of substantive representation are wrongly 'unidirectional', as they depict representatives acting for the represented who otherwise remain passive (2006, 300). Further, they ignore the fact that 'at the heart of the act of representing is the depicting of a constituency *as* this or that, as requiring this or that, as having this or that set of interests' (206, 300–301, emphasis in the original). This is because 'would-be political representatives … *make claims* about themselves and their constituents and the links between the two' (2006, 302, emphasis in the original). Consequently, representation is

not a passive procedure of receiving clear signals from below; rather, it is dynamic, performative, and constitutive. Pushed to its limits, this reorientation implies that the represented exists by virtue of the representative, who becomes the principal and the represented the agent. Together with Mansbridge's notion of anticipatory representation, these ideas open up these processes to incorporate a broader range of actors, contexts, objects, and outcomes than traditional theories of political representation.

Feminist Research on Political Representation

Feminists have drawn on these insights to varying degrees when conceptualising their research on women's political representation. One literature explicitly engages with these debates, namely work on women's legislative behaviour, which explores links between women in political office and 'women-friendly' policy outcomes. Despite their interest in descriptive representation, these scholars do not challenge Pitkin's claim that the focus should be on what representatives *do* rather than on what they *are*. Rather, they seek to explore Anne Phillips's (1995) intuition that the sex of representatives matters to how they act, even when it is not *only* or *all* that is important. While most agree that the political actors central to women's substantive representation are likely to be women, this is not the same as maintaining that they will—or have to be—biologically female (Young 2000). For this reason, most point to other features of the political context—for example, situations of mistrust or uncrystallised interests (Mansbridge 1999; Dovi 2002)—that enhance the need for descriptive representation in order to achieve some amount of substantive representation. At the same time, many feminists explicitly recognise women's heterogeneity as a group, observing that there is 'no empirical nor theoretical plausibility' to the idea that women share *all* or even *particular* experiences. As such, many prefer to talk in terms of women having a higher likelihood of 'hitting the target' in terms of acting for women, even whilst admitting that female representatives are still 'shooting in the dark' (Phillips 1995, 53–55).

To examine the validity of these arguments empirically, feminist researchers have analysed both attitudinal and behavioural differences between male and female office-holders (see also Celis 2008b, this issue). They have found that men and women espouse distinct policy priorities (Thomas and Welch 1991; Swers 1998), at the same time that female parliamentarians often report feeling an obligation to represent women (Reingold 2000; Carroll 2002), recognise the existence of 'women's interests' (Skjeie 1998), and share many of the same opinions as female voters (Mateo Diaz 2005) and women's movement activists (Lovenduski 1997). With regard to their behaviour, scholars find that women tend to differ most from men in terms of setting the legislative agenda and proposing new bills that address issues of concern to women (Bratton and Ray 2002; Childs 2004). Further, their presence often leads to changes in political discourses (Grey 2002) and shifts in parliamentary practices and working hours (Skjeie 1991). However, this body of research also notes that a mere increase in the numbers of women elected—a 'critical mass'—does not always translate automatically into policy gains for women, given various constraints related to party affiliation, institutional norms, legislative inexperience, and the external political environment (Kathlene 1995; Childs 2004; Beckwith and Cowell-Meyers 2007; Celis 2008a). Instead, what appears to be important is having 'critical actors': individuals who initiate policy proposals on their own or who embolden others to take steps to promote

policies for women, regardless of the proportion of female representatives (Childs and Krook 2006). Indeed, they may not even be women: in some situations, individual men may play a crucial role in advancing women's policy concerns (Tamerius 1995; Celis 2006).

A second feminist literature addresses issues of substantive representation in a less explicit manner, but provides important insights into two alternative sources of policy change: women's movements and state agencies. Research on 'state feminism' combines a focus on the two, exploring the degree to which women's policy machineries—special units charged with promoting women's rights, including offices, commissions, agencies, ministries, committees, secretaries, or advisors for the status of women (McBride Stetson and Mazur 1995; Chappell 2002)—reflect women's movement demands when seeking to elaborate social and economic policies that may be beneficial to women as a group. The effectiveness of these agencies in both respects is an open empirical question. Scholars have thus explored whether women's policy agencies have been successful in advancing women's concerns, as well as the specific conditions for their success and failure (Kantola and Outshoorn 2007). Many find that women's policy agencies constitute effective links between women's movements and the state, through studies of various policy debates on abortion (McBride Stetson 2001), domestic violence (Weldon 2002), prostitution (Outshoorn 2004), job training (Mazur 2001), and political representation (Lovenduski et al. 2005). At the same time, however, they note important conditions for success, which include the location and resources of these agencies (Rai 2003), the open or closed nature of the policy sub-system, the party in power at the time, and the unity and commitment of the women's movement to the particular issue at hand (McBride Stetson 2001; Mazur 2001; Outshoorn 2004).

Although scholars interested in gender and representation tend to focus either on women's legislative behaviour or on women's policy agencies, some recent contributions have sought to bridge this gap to a certain extent. Most notably, S. Laurel Weldon (2002) recognises that individual legislators may constitute one medium of representation, but suggests that other sites, like women's movements and women's policy agencies, offer alternative—and perhaps more effective—sites of representation. Weldon justifies this argument on the grounds that 'women's interests' are best defined through collective processes of interest articulation, rather than simply the perspective of a single legislator. Nonetheless, she also tempers her optimism regarding these sites, stating that in order to substantively represent women, women's policy agencies much have resources and authority and 'a degree of independence' (Weldon 2002, 1160), while women's movements must not be coterminous with the state so that they may criticise government policy. The most successful cases of SRW, in her view, are generated through the interaction of these two conditions: a strong women's movement 'improve[s] the institutional capabilities of government in addressing women's issues', while strong women's policy agencies provide 'additional resources to women's organizations' (Weldon 2002, 1162). Although not theorised as such, this conceptual frame points to the multiple possible sites of substantive representation, which may substitute, work together, or even potentially compete with one another to promote women's policy concerns. Combined with the notion of 'critical actors', this approach presents a series of new opportunities for analysing a wider range of activities—in terms of form, content, and location—related to the substantive representation of women as a group.

Towards a New Conceptual Framework

Taken together, these recent innovations demonstrate that if the goal is to capture the richness of 'what is going on in representation' (Saward 2006), it is crucial to broaden the scope of inquiry to acknowledge multiple actors who are engaged in representational activities in a variety of different sites. This revised perspective requires a new approach to the study of gender and political representation, abandoning questions like 'Do women represent women?' or 'Do women in politics make a difference?' in favour of questions like 'Who claims to act for women?' and 'Where, why, and how does SRW occur?'. To facilitate this shift, we recommend a new research agenda organised around four key questions: Who acts in the SRW? Where does the SRW occur? Why is SRW attempted? How is SRW expressed? This approach, we argue, opens up the definition of SRW itself, requiring scholars to move away from a-priori assumptions that restrict empirical studies to a narrow set of actors, sites, interests, and outcomes.

Who acts in SRW?

Work that explicitly addresses women's substantive representation focuses almost exclusively on the behaviour of female representatives in national parliaments. However, it is well known that not all women in parliaments seek to promote women's concerns, at the same time that some men do. Further, research on women's movements and the state suggests that actors other than parliamentarians may seek to promote women as a group, as much and perhaps even more than women in elected politics. For this reason, we argue that it is more fruitful to search for 'critical actors', who we define as individuals or agencies who initiate policy proposals and often—but not necessarily—embolden others to take steps to promote women's policy concerns (Childs and Krook 2006; Childs and Withey 2006). Who these 'critical actors' are remains an open question. Taking their role seriously, however, requires careful attention to a wide range of possible players, including male and female legislators, ministers, party members, bureaucrats, and members of civil society groups.

Expanding the number of potential actors in SRW, in turn, raises important issues related to the conditions under which critical actors may emerge and substantively represent women as a group. As many scholars have increasingly begun to appreciate, acting for women is not 'universally or perpetually available to political actors', nor is it dependent solely on political will (Beckwith 2002, 10; see also Celis 2008b, this issue). Thus, it is worth considering what might constitute conditions that are more conducive to SRW. One hypothesis might be that critical actors are more likely to effect feminised change in instances where they occupy strong political positions, act in association with actors in other arenas in various kinds of 'strategic alliances', and seek policies that are ideologically congruent with the governing party (Weldon 2002; Beckwith and Cowell-Meyers 2007; Kantola and Outshoorn 2007). Yet, as alluded to above, it may also be worthwhile to explore the possibility of competition and conflict—not just collaboration, mutual reinforcement, and recipro-city—between actors in these different sites, who may have alternative—if not directly opposing—conceptions of what SRW means in terms of its content, direction, and purpose.

Where does SRW occur?

As already mentioned, most theoretical and empirical studies of SRW focus almost exclusively on national parliaments. However, as our review of the broader literature on gender and politics reveals, SRW may in fact take place in multiple locations. On the one hand, initiatives to improve women's status are frequently pursued and debated at different—and often interacting—levels of government, namely supranational, national, regional, and local political assemblies. On the other hand, women's issues are also raised in a variety of political forums, like legislatures, cabinets, women's policy agencies, non-governmental organisations, and civil society (Chappell 2002; Banaszak et al. 2003; Lovenduski et al. 2005; Ferree and Tripp 2006; Kantola 2006), in addition to venues often not discussed—but perhaps equally important to women's representation—like courts and constitutions (see Baines and Rubio-Marin 2005). As such, we argue that it is crucial to consider the opportunities and constraints presented by multiple possible sites of representation, which may vary across countries and over time with regard to their potential to promote SRW.

The location where SRW occurs is crucial because it provides a platform for actors who seek to 'act for' or make 'representative claims' on behalf of women as a group. However, it is important to recognise that these spaces may also constitute actors and their behaviour, shaping not only who may speak but also the terms under which they may articulate their demands. In order to make their voices heard, for example, actors often frame their claims to 'fit' a particular context. A good illustration of this dynamics emerges in research done by Barbara Hobson and Marika Lindholm (1997), in which they trace the process of creating a 'women's constituency' in the 1930s, a time when the women's movement was fractured and the basic principles of the Swedish welfare state were first being formulated. They noted the ways in which Swedish women activists used the particular image of themselves as mothers to articulate their claims and demands within the social democratic discourse of the *folkhem*, or 'people's home', which evoked images of a collective community shared by all Swedes. These patterns suggest that institutional contexts are not stable configurations, but dynamic systems 'in which historical contingency, social actors, and new discursive fields destabilise and reconfigure institutional arrangements' (Hobson and Lindholm 1997, 479). Thus, these contextual elements do not simply form the backdrop for SRW, but also actively shape what kinds of strategies actors may employ in their efforts to promote women.

Why is SRW attempted?

The existing literature on women's legislative behaviour assumes that women in parliament will pursue 'women's issues' because they are motivated to promote interests that women have in common. This approach is largely consistent with Pitkin's definition of substantive representation as 'acting in the interest of the *represented*, in a manner responsive to them' (our emphasis, Pitkin 1967, 209). However, gender and politics scholars interpret 'women's interests' in a variety of different ways to include the autonomy and well-being of women (Bratton 2005), concerns that belong to the private sphere according to established views on gender relations (Meyer 2003), areas where surveys discover a gender gap in the population (Schwindt-Bayer 2006), and any issues of concern to the broader society (Dolan and Ford 1998). The problem with this method is

that it involves making a-priori assumptions about the nature of 'women' as a group, thus essentialising women and their interests and—in many cases—eliding SRW with the feminist SRW (Childs 2004; Celis 2008a). It is important to emphasise that feminist concerns are only one possible facet of SRW. In addition to these 'strategic interests', SRW can also involve the 'practical interests' that emerge from the concrete conditions of women's lives (Molyneux 1985; Celis 2008b, this issue).

A means for getting beyond this impasse on defining 'women's interests' is to return to Saward's (2006) thesis that representation is, at least in part, a performance of claim making. From this perspective, discourses are central features of SRW, in which acting for women involves claiming to represent women and framing issues as being of importance to women. Substantive representation of women should be considered a process of interest articulation during which a multitude of interests and perspectives can be formulated, however these may be defined. Thus, SRW can have different aims and motivations: improving women's living conditions, striving for equality between women and men, or stressing difference and complementarity. Substantive representation of women can therefore be exclusively about women or about gender or exploring men's and women's positions in society. Judith Squires (2008, this issue) describes this dynamic as the 'constitutive representation of gender'. Incorporating these ideas, we argue for taking a more agnostic and eclectic view of the contents of, and motivations behind, SRW, allowing them to surface over the course of the research process through these individual and collective articulations (Weldon 2002; Celis 2006).

Taken seriously, this approach reveals that in many instances several actors may make claims regarding SRW, which can be complementary but also contradictory, leading to broader contestation about what in fact constitutes 'women's interests' (Celis 2006). These conflicts may play themselves out in a number of different—and sometimes unexpected—ways, pointing to the role of pre-existing discursive frames, but also the importance of contingent events and even unintended outcomes. One example can be seen in nineteenth and early twentieth century protective labour laws limiting night and mine labour for women, which—despite their focus on women's ability to engage in wage labour—were discursively constructed as protecting the nation's offspring and diminishing competition for male labourers rather than as improving the labour conditions of women (Gubin 1991). A distinct dynamic emerges in the case of gender equality policy in the European Union, where—due to a change in political tides—the concept of the 'reconciliation of work and family life' gradually shifted from a feminist meaning ('sharing family responsibilities between men and women') to a market-oriented strategy ('encouraging a flexible workforce'), more deeply embedded in the political and economic priorities of the EU (Stratigaki 2004, 30). In these two cases, a-priori definitions of 'women's interests' would overlook important events within the broader field of policy reforms that may benefit—or harm—women as a group.

How is SRW expressed?

Current work on women's substantive representation in parliament focuses primarily on documenting differences in the policy priorities, as well as the voting records, of male and female legislators. However, a number of scholars criticise this approach on the grounds that priorities do not always translate into policy initiatives on behalf of women as a group. Further, some are increasingly sceptical of the usefulness of voting as a measure

of SRW, arguing that voting in favour of women's issues simply requires a legislator to prefer a policy to its alternative. In contrast, activities like drafting bills, participating in public debates, and lobbying legislators and colleagues entail a far greater commitment to the cause in terms of time, knowledge, and money (Tamerius 1995). By way of comparison, the literature on state feminism examines whether and how political debates are gendered, and how this relates to women's inclusion in the policy-making process. While more open to multiple interpretations of women's interest in relation to these various issues, this work limits the scope of investigation by delimiting ahead of time in what kinds of activities women's policy agencies can and might engage. In response to these various patterns, we argue that it is necessary to explore interventions at various points in political processes—on a wide array of political issues—to identify the claims made in favour of SRW, the actions taken to promote SRW, and the outcomes of these attempts. In contrast to the research strategy implicit in other studies, this approach enables—and in fact requires—scholars to treat failed and successful attempts at policy change, by actors in a broad range of policy arenas, as various instances of SRW.

Conclusions

In this article, we attempt to make a case for shifting the terms of the debate on SRW. Rather than asking questions like 'Do women represent women?' or 'Do women in politics make a difference?'; we advocate moving towards alternative questions like 'Who claims to act for women?' and 'Where, why, and how does SRW occur?'. The former approach assumes that (i) women are the actors; (ii) elected assemblies are the site; (iii) women's interests are the reason; and (iv) distinct policies are the result. The latter opens up these assumptions to explore (i) who acts in SRW; (ii) where SRW occurs; (iii) why SRW is attempted; and (iv) how SRW is expressed. Rather than making a-priori decisions about the actors, sites, motivations, and outcomes of SRW, this framework remains more agnostic— and subject to empirical investigation—the processes and modes of political representation on behalf of women as a group. In this sense, it promotes a more 'problem-driven' approach to the study of political representation (cf. Krook and Squires 2006), treating cases more holistically, with a view to the multiple and varied actors, sites, motivations, and outcomes of SRW. Rethinking how representation 'works' in this broader sense is crucial, as it suggests that parliamentary strategies are important, but not necessarily the only political means for improving the lives of women as a group.

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