

Gender and Politics: The State of the Art

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Over the last two decades, but particularly in the last 10 years, research into sex, gender and politics has become an established sub-field of political science. This article opens with some reflections on the position of ‘women and politics’ scholars and research within the British political science community. It then moves on to reflect upon the burgeoning literature on women’s political representation. In particular, it questions the way in which the relationship between women’s descriptive and substantive representation has been operationalised and investigated in empirical research, namely through the concept of critical mass. Seeking to reframe these debates, the article suggests that future research should focus not on the question of *when* women make a difference, but on *how* the substantive representation of women occurs.

Introduction

Discussing the state of the ‘women and politics’ discipline seems fashionable as of late: *Politics* is the third mainstream politics journal in the last 18 months to have commissioned an article surveying the field (see Fiona Mackay in the *British Journal of Politics & International Relations* (2004) and Mona Lena Krook and Judith Squires in the launch issue of *British Politics* (forthcoming)).² Both *Parliamentary Affairs* and the *BJPIR* have also published special issues in the same time period. Further, alongside recent research monographs, such as Joni Lovenduski’s *Feminizing Politics* (2005) and Wendy Stokes’s textbook, *Women in Contemporary Politics* (2005), two of this year’s big ‘three’ British general election edited collections contain stand-alone chapters on women (Norris and Wlezien, 2005; Geddes and Tonge, 2005).

Gender and politics³ scholars, mostly women,⁴ are increasingly visible in the profession at both senior and junior levels.⁵ The PSA Women and Politics specialist group is the second most active in the PSA with a membership of approximately 60,⁶ and its Annual Conference routinely attracts more than 40 women, impressing overseas visitors.⁷ There are also strong and, in some cases, long-standing international contacts. Relationships are forged and maintained at the personal level and through conferences, such as the ‘Women and Westminster Compared’ Conference held in Ottawa in 2004; research networks, such as the ECPR Women and Politics Standing Group; and specialised women and politics projects, such as RNGS (Research Network on Gender, Politics and the State) and MAGEEQ (Gender Mainstreaming and Equality). Deeper institutional links with our sister organisations in the US are currently being developed.



Gender and politics scholars are also making their presence felt within the wider British political science community: panels are organised for each annual PSA conference and in 2005 there were four official ones covering gender and British politics, comparative politics, political theory and international relations (www.psa.ac.uk). Joint panels are also held with the largest and most active PSA specialist group, the Elections, Public Opinion and Parties specialist group (EPOP), at both PSA and EPOP annual conferences. Such efforts ensure that gendered analyses and women scholars are heard in mainstream forums. Other efforts to encourage postgraduate study and publicise gender and politics research include an annual undergraduate essay prize.⁸ Finally, the recent (2005) elections to the Political Studies Association (PSA) Executive saw a clear 'vote for women': all of the new women Executive members are also members of the PSA Women and Politics Specialist Group.

In research terms, gender and politics scholarship in the UK (and internationally) has emerged as a 'coherent sub-field' (Mackay, 2004, p. 113). Indeed, when mainstream editors, publishers and conference convenors no longer feel able to ignore the work of feminist political scientists – for either positive or negative reasons – and acknowledge that the absence of women contributors 'looks wrong', then a change for the better has most definitely occurred: feminist analyses have become at least *part* of the ordinary landscape of political science (cf. Lovenduski, 1981, pp. 94–95). Analysis of the 40 academic journal articles on political representation cited by Krook and Squires (forthcoming) and Mackay (2004) and published since 1990 shows that gender and politics research is ghettoised neither in women's journals nor in non-PSA journals: 21 were published in mainstream (omnibus and specialist) political science journals. Twelve articles were published in special 'women and politics' issues (two *Parliamentary Affairs*, and one *BJPIR*), three in other disciplinary journals, two in a 'women's' journal,⁹ and two in a journal (*Contemporary Politics*) which considers that it is 'of interest to all those disciplines which have an interface with politics ... [inter alia] gender.'¹⁰

The question of whether 'women and politics' special editions are a 'good thing' is open to debate. On the one hand, they offer a means by which a substantial body of research can be presented at the same time and in one place, providing a useful resource for fellow researchers, colleagues and students. When the publications derive from specialist conferences, they are likely to enhance significantly the quality of research, as scholars exchange ideas extensively prior to publication. They also have symbolic value by signalling our collective presence within the wider discipline. On the other hand, a special issue carries the risk that unsympathetic readers will leave the volumes unread on the shelf. As is often the case, the preferred outcome is thus to generate special issues and place this research into mainstream omnibus and specialist journals.

All the same, comments from gender and politics scholars¹¹ suggest limits in the extent to which they have feminised the discipline: they may be increasing in number, along with the numbers of women in the profession more generally (*PSA News*, March 2005),¹² but senior academics have not been averse to telling them that they would have a *better* chance of getting *better* jobs if they worked on some-

thing *other* than women and politics.¹³ This scepticism about the value of feminist research is compounded by the fact that many gender and politics scholars favour qualitative methods, especially elite interviewing, at a time when many top journals privilege large-N quantitative analyses (Lovenduski, 1998; Randall, 2002; Sapiro, 1998) and some academics remain suspicious of feminist research per se because of their concerns about its objectivity (Randall, 1991, p. 524; 1994). Other problems include the (lack of) funding of feminist political science, as well as the fragility of the few established clusters of gender and politics scholars in individual institutions in the UK; if a woman retires or moves institutions, intellectual and research synergy can easily dissipate, as well as the often under-appreciated personal and social support fostered by a community of feminist scholars.

Furthermore, mainstream research continues not to engage fully with feminist analyses. Even highly respected research monographs are found wanting (Ware, 2003),¹⁴ and if one analyses the impact of gender and politics scholars on the curriculum by looking at undergraduate textbooks, the ongoing marginality of feminist research becomes clear (Stokes, 2005). Taking four British politics textbooks randomly off the shelf – incidentally, all written by individual men or teams of male academics (Moran, 2005; Budge et al., 2004; Coxall, Robins and Leach, 2003; Jones et al., 2001) – and looking at the index for submissions under the headings of women, gender and feminism finds only 50 pages (or parts thereof) out of a total of 2,377. While this constitutes a mere 2 per cent, looking more specifically for women's political recruitment, perhaps the largest field of research by gender and politics scholars, reveals just 14 pages. This lack of attention is troubling, because the feminisation of the British party system over the last decade is a significant transformation of formal political institutions in the UK and clearly falls within the remit of mainstream political science. Also, it is not as if there is a dearth of research upon which to draw. As Lovenduski (2005) states in the introduction to *Feminizing Politics*, one of the aims of her book is 'once again to draw attention of political scientists to the importance of gender to the study of politics' and to 'add to the pressure to incorporate gender into the mainstream of political science', points that she and others have been making for more than 20 years (Lovenduski, 2005, p. 10, emphasis added; 1981; Randall, 2002 and 1991; Sapiro, 1998).

Research on gender and politics has nonetheless evolved significantly over the years. In the first stage, gender and politics approaches were critical of the biases of mainstream political science and its virtual exclusion of women from the category of political actor. In the second stage, studies sought to 'add women and stir' by undertaking the first systematic analyses of women's underrepresentation.¹⁵ In the third and current stage, feminist political scientists raise more fundamental questions about political science methods/approaches, the conceptualisation of politics and the 'gendered' nature of political institutions and processes (Randall, 2002).¹⁶ Far from being narrow and partial, contemporary research on gender and politics is therefore extensive, diverse and rich, so much so that the major component parts of political studies – political theory, government, comparative politics and international relations – could each have a 'state of the art' essay devoted to them. Further, studies within each of these sub-fields are sufficiently varied to permit several distinct interpretations of their main contributions and likely directions for future research.

As such, this article focuses on a set of issues signalled but not taken up at length in the two other recent review articles on gender and British politics. Mackay (2004) surveys the literature on women's numerical representation (systemic and individual factors of women's recruitment) and substantive representation (theoretical approaches and empirical studies) and identifies two clear foci in British research: the gendered impact of the entry of substantial numbers of women to the House of Commons and the relationship between gender and institutional design in the devolved assemblies of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Krook and Squires (forthcoming), in contrast, examine work on gender quotas in British politics and highlight the distinctive willingness of these scholars to employ various theoretical frames and to explore possibilities for synthesising and juxtaposing methods in innovative ways. This article integrates these points but underscores a third key question guiding research on gender and politics, namely what difference women's political presence makes and how we know when women have made a difference. While these issues have been the focus of a great deal of attention in the British context, a more systematic discussion of its strengths and weaknesses is crucially important for analysing women's political representation more generally, and thus for illuminating the potential contribution of this work to better understandings of the substantive representation of women.

Women's substantive representation

Many contemporary feminist theorists argue that there are theoretically coherent grounds for presuming a relationship between the numbers of women elected to political office and the passage of legislation beneficial to women as a group (see for example Phillips, 1995 and 1998). Keen to examine this relationship in practice, feminist political scientists have often relied upon the concept of 'critical mass' to explore changes in the percentage of women in political assemblies and the transformation of political behaviour, institutions and public policy (Studlar and McAllister, 2002). According to its proponents, the presence of a 'critical mass' of women – usually considered somewhere between 15 and 30 per cent – explains increased legislative attention to women's issues and gendered changes to existing parliamentary procedures, while the absence of a 'critical mass' accounts for why women do not appear to have made a difference yet in these areas in many parliaments around the world. Its growing ranks of critics, however, suggest that the time has come to examine the usefulness of this concept for understanding women's legislative impact, as higher proportions of women do not always translate into gains for women as a group, while smaller proportions of women are sometimes very effective in bringing new issues to the political agenda (Childs and Krook, 2005; Childs and Withey (forthcoming); Childs, 2005; Mackay, 2004).¹⁷

A possible means for resolving these debates is to acknowledge that Rosabeth Moss Kanter, in her seminal contributions on the effects of proportions on group life (Kanter, 1977a and 1977b), in fact makes three claims regarding the relative balance of women and men in corporations: with increased relative numbers, women might 'form coalitions and affect the culture of the group'; with increased relative numbers, women might 'begin to become individuals differentiated from

one another'; and with increased absolute numbers, even with a small shift in relative numbers, women might develop 'a close alliance and refuse to be turned against each other [due to] strong identification with the feminist cause or with other women' (Kanter, 1977a, pp. 209, 238). As most of the literature on 'critical mass' only works within the framework of the first expectation, anticipating that the advent of more women will lead to greater co-operation among them on feminist issues, it largely ignores these alternative possibilities. As such, when research uncovers these other two dynamics, they generally frame their findings as a fundamental refutation of the critical mass hypothesis.

This lack of theoretical clarity is compounded by empirical and methodological problems that stem from a focus on macro-level behaviour (what do 'women' do?) rather than micro-level behaviour (what do specific women do?). More specifically, as it is commonly understood and operationalised, the concept of 'critical mass' makes two problematic first-order assumptions: first, that (all) female representatives want to act for women, and second, that the percentage of women present is the key determinant of women's legislative behaviour. As a result, the impact of women's presence is too often simply 'read' from women's bodies in an essentialist and reductive manner. In so doing, it elides women's bodies and feminist minds by uncritically inferring that the difference that female representatives will make is a feminist one. Further, even when it can be established that particular women wish to act for women, focusing solely on numbers of women overlooks the politics of the policymaking process, whereby it is often difficult to find a straightforward correlation between attitudes and behaviour. Consequently, while women may want to make a difference, they may be prevented from translating their preferences into policy outcomes by various features of the political context. For this reason, recent work on 'critical mass' recognises that female representatives act within particular gendered institutions and thus tries to control for factors that might constrain or enable women to influence policymaking, including party identity, feminism, sexism, institutional position/newness, the presence of gender machinery and links with women's groups in civil society.¹⁸

Because the likelihood that female representatives act for women depends on a range of different factors, gender and politics scholars would do better to investigate not *when* women make a difference but *how* the substantive representation of women occurs (Childs and Krook, 2005). This change in emphasis shifts the focus away from trying to determine the percentage of women that constitutes a 'critical mass' or identifying all the possible variables that mediate the impact of numbers. It thus opens up a series of new directions for analysing legislative behaviour by abandoning uniform expectations about numbers and political contexts, as well as strict definitions of the interests and identities of female legislators. As such, it responds to criticisms on the basis of essentialism that stress important differences among women, as well as concerns about eliding feminism and women's political representation, by relaxing overly restrictive analytical frames regarding the form and content of 'acting for' women. While this approach addresses important empirical questions related to the substantive representation of women, however, it foregrounds the issues of research methods and methodology by raising – but not necessarily resolving – questions related to the development of a more complex model of women's legislative behaviour.

How do we know when women make a difference?

Feminist research in political science is problem driven rather than method driven and as such is characterised by an eclectic and open-minded approach to methodological questions (Krook and Squires (forthcoming)). Nonetheless, it often favours certain research methods over others in ways that influence the content of research findings. In work on women's substantive representation, scholars most often conduct interviews with political elites. While this choice reflects conscious attempts to understand the formation of beliefs and why particular attitudes are held (Considine and Deutchman, 1996), in practice this technique has crucial limitations. Most importantly, the majority of researchers elect to interview women exclusively (Childs, 2004), illuminating women's attitudes and perceptions but overlooking any similar analysis of men's attitudes and perceptions that might cast light on changing gender dynamics in parliament (Mackay, 2004, p. 110). Further, data gathered in interviews are based on self-reported claims that – by their nature – do not permit careful examination of the actual veracity of these claims (Lovenduski and Norris, 2003).

For this reason, a number of researchers have turned to statistical analyses in their recent work, at least partly for strategic reasons; some sceptics who did not believe women MPs' claims to have acted for women became convinced once it had been demonstrated that Labour's women MPs had disproportionately signed women's and feminist women's Early Day Motions (EDMs) (Childs and Withey, 2004).¹⁹ Although such methods have long been dominant in political science (Lovenduski, 1981), feminist researchers have generally been cautious about 'squashing people into little numbers'²⁰ that can be subjected to robust statistical tests but that may offer less guidance than interviews in terms of explaining women's behaviour within gendered institutions. Nonetheless, driven by a desire to answer a particular research question in the fullest possible way, individual scholars often switch between or combine various research techniques – including interviews, statistical analysis, surveys, questionnaires, first-hand accounts, participant observation, discourse analysis, content analysis and process tracing (Krook and Squires (forthcoming)) – even when this demands that they acquire new methods of training and expertise. All the same, efforts at triangulation are not usually easy or straightforward, due not least to the differing epistemological rationales of distinct research techniques (Mackay, 2004). Commenting on Cowley and Childs' (2003) research on Labour rebellions in the House of Commons, Mackay concluded that the research ended in 'something of a stalemate, with inconclusive statistical data ... and inoperationalizable claims as to the reasons drawn from qualitative data ...' (Mackay, 2004, p. 11).

Methodological pluralism may help shed light on many of the puzzles guiding work on gender and politics, but in order to facilitate genuinely cumulative insights, researchers must consider carefully what constitutes 'proof' in terms of the substantive representation of women. Perhaps the most problematic issue concerns the search for sex differences on the grounds that women must be distinct in some way from men for their presence to be regarded as having an impact on public policy. This question is complicated by a tendency among both feminist and mainstream scholars to elide the terms 'sex' and 'gender'; while the former refers to

biological distinctions of female and male, the latter refers to socially and culturally constructed norms of femininity and masculinity. Although post-modern feminists maintain that 'sex' itself is constructed through norms of 'gender' (Butler, 1990), feminist political scientists generally hold to the category of 'women' but remain conscious of the need to be sceptical about its unity (Lovenduski, 1998).

Nonetheless, researchers continue to struggle with expectations regarding attitudinal and behavioural sex differences, especially when their studies reveal similarities among women and men (Cammisa and Reingold, 2004). While these continuities may be due to the absence of a 'critical mass' of women, they may also simply reflect a failure to consider politics through a gendered frame of reference (Lovenduski, 1998). Adopting such a frame requires that scholars explore how political institutions reflect assumptions about femininities and masculinities and thus structure and reinforce unequal gendered power relations (Mackay, 2004; Randall, 2002; Sapiro, 1998). Consequently, while observed differences between women and men are an indication of the substantive representation of women, the absence of such differences does not necessarily prove the opposite, because factors beyond the preferences of female representatives may interfere with their opportunities to act for women or may dilute their impact due to changes in the behaviour of male representatives.

Recognising these possibilities, scholars take two approaches to explaining the lack of sex differences. The first involves rethinking dynamics of legislative policymaking by identifying variables, like party affiliation, that mediate chances to act for women; examining the costliness of certain legislative activities as compared with others in relation to levels of support for specific types of policy change; and calling attention to other stages of the legislative process – especially agenda setting – where sex differences appear to play a stronger role (Tamerius, 1995). The second entails integrating men into the analysis by considering whether the absence of difference reflects a convergence in the attitudes of women and men, either as a result of changing gender roles in society or due to women's effect on men within legislative institutions. In such cases, distances between women's and men's behaviour are masked by focusing on sex (a dichotomous measure) rather than gender (a continuous measure) (Swers, 2002), because women and men are grouped not on the basis of their gender identity but with members of their own sex, even if they are attitudinally and behaviourally distinct from them.

Difficulties grappling with these issues can be lessened, however, if gender and politics scholars focus not on when women make a difference but on how the substantive representation of women occurs. The former presupposes that only women can act for women and that their presence matters only when they act differently than men, while the latter both opens up the possibility that men can also act for women and recognises a range of possible outcomes that are still consistent with the notion of acting for women. Unravelling these complexities will require careful case-by-case analysis, and thus research that takes this shift seriously will need to draw on methods and approaches that facilitate in-depth case study, such as interviews, participant observation and process tracing (Childs and Krook, 2005; Dodson and Carroll, 1991). Refocusing the broader research agenda on these ques-

tions will also compel an analytic separation between the feminisation of the political agenda (where women's concerns and perspectives are articulated) and the feminisation of legislation (where output has been transformed), as the articulation of women's concerns constitutes an attempt to represent them substantively even where this has little or no effect in terms of legislative output.

This does not mean that gender and politics research should never undertake large-N studies. Rather, it suggests that in order for large-N studies of women's substantive representation to be robust and meaningful, a greater number of micro-level studies need to be undertaken before scholars seek to aggregate larger amounts of data. At that point, however, comparative work must remain attentive to nuances in forms of legislative behaviour across national contexts in order to generate more cumulative and general insights into the dynamics behind efforts to improve women's substantive representation. Accomplishing this will entail recognising the cultural, spatial and temporal specificities of individual cases and translating them into language that is transferable across contexts, such that it is possible to draw conclusions that can inform analyses of other cases.

Conclusion

The state of gender and politics research is healthier than ever before: not only are there growing numbers of scholars engaged in studies of gender and politics – both in the UK and internationally – but its presence in mainstream political science is also increasing, despite some indicators of continued marginality. The most extensive, diverse and rich aspect of this literature in Britain concerns women's political representation in the country's formal political institutions. New research in particular has been driven by the substantial, although by no means sufficient, rise in the numbers of women present in parliament and the new devolved institutions. As part of this work, British gender and politics scholars – alongside and with colleagues overseas – have begun to reconsider some of the concepts and approaches long used in this sub-field of political science. A shared dissatisfaction seems to suggest, as outlined in this article, that the time has come to adopt new conceptual frames and take on board new approaches and methods. More specifically, understanding the substantive representation of women will require researchers to move beyond the seemingly straightforward concept of 'critical mass' and to abandon – at least for the time being – macro-level quantitative studies that seek to determine when women make a difference by looking exclusively for sex differences. At the minimum, the gender and politics community should debate these issues further instead of simply replicating existing modes of research that have served to obfuscate, rather than clarify, the relationship between the descriptive and substantive representation of women.

Notes

- 1 Sarah Childs is the Convenor of the Women and Politics Specialist Group of the PSA. However, the views represented in this article reflect personal views, not necessarily the views of the group. Mona Lena Krook was an ESRC post-doctoral fellow at the University of Bristol 2004–2005. This research is truly co-authored: our 'across-the-table' 'stream of consciousness' became transformed as we questioned, developed, contested and refined our thoughts into analysis whose origin we could no longer locate in either one of us. Good (feminist) political science, we wondered?

- 2 This article does not purport to survey the totality of research on women and politics. See Randall (1991 and 2002), Squires (1999) and Sapiro (1998) for discussions of how feminism has reconceptualised the political.
- 3 This use follows Sapiro (1998).
- 4 Nearly one-third of women political scientists teach 'gender studies' in contrast to 4 per cent of men (Bennie and Topf, 2003, p. 10). We take gender studies here to refer to gender and politics and not to the interdisciplinary study of gender relations.
- 5 In 2002, women constituted 24 per cent of the political studies profession in the UK, a rise from 19 per cent in 1997, 12 per cent in 1987 and 10 per cent in 1978 (Bennie and Topf, 2003).
- 6 The group is open to all women members of the PSA and to men and women who study gender and politics. There is no data on members' ethnicity.
- 7 Canadian visitors to the 2005 Annual Conference held at the University of Bristol.
- 8 This initiative was first introduced when Wendy Stokes and Emma Clarence were Convenor and Treasurer of the PSA Women and Politics Group. Last year's winner has recently been accepted for an ESRC 1 plus 3 award. <http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/opportunities/postgraduate/fundingopportunities/index8.aspx>
- 9 *Social Politics, International Studies in Gender, State and Society and Women: A Cultural Review*.
- 10 <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/13569775.as>
- 11 The following does not purport to be a systematic study of members' views.
- 12 Sex differences were found in respect of the four key factors that influence the decision to undertake postgraduate work: financial considerations; the desire to make a difference; information/awareness; and self-confidence (Akhtar et al., 2005). The research also identifies the importance of stereotypes of academics, the lack of women role models, concern about the areas in which women research, and the (in)compatibility of family and academic life.
- 13 See similar comments by Sapiro (1998, p. 67). A 2002 PSA survey revealed that women (not just those who are gender and politics scholars) are less likely to be in permanent or senior posts than men (even controlling for their age); are less likely to have been promoted in recent years; earn less, even at the professorial level; and finally, more likely to indicate that they had been treated unfairly (60 per cent compared to 3 per cent) and to disagree with the statement that women and men have the same opportunities in the political science profession (Bennie and Topf, 2003; Sapiro, 1988).
- 14 See Alan Ware's review of Paul Webb's (2000) *The Modern British Party System* (Ware, 2003). Highlighting this case is rather unfair; it is likely that many other texts would be subject to the same criticism, if only their reviewers had considered feminist analyses.
- 15 With women constituting less than 20 per cent of the House of Commons, it is still necessary to count the numbers of women and account for their underrepresentation (Childs, Campbell and Lovenduski, 2005).
- 16 See also Lovenduski (1981) and Mackay (2004).
- 17 This discussion of critical mass draws on Childs and Krook (2005).
- 18 Lovenduski and Norris (2003); Yoder (1991); Reingold (2000); Beckwith (2003); Weldon (2002).
- 19 As one senior British political scientist told one of the authors.
- 20 Sapiro (1998, pp. 76–77); see also Lovenduski (1981 and 1998); Randall (2002); Sapiro (1998, p. 76); Mackay (2004, pp. 109–110).

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