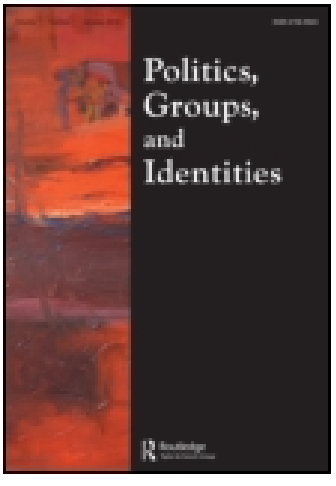

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Empowerment versus backlash: gender quotas and critical mass theory

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DIALOGUE: GENDER, GROUP DELIBERATION, AND AUTHORITY

Empowerment versus backlash: gender quotas and critical mass theory

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Karpowitz, Mendelberg, and Mattioli [*Politics, Groups, and Identities* 3 (1): 149–177. doi:10.1080/21565503.2014.999804] present an important new contribution to debates on critical mass theory, exploring the conditional effects of women's increased presence in organizations stemming from the use of different decision-making rules. Distinct from other work, they focus on the process of representation, theorizing gendered opportunities and constraints for women to exercise political influence. Like other critical mass scholars, however, they overlook the possibility of backlash and resistance in the face of women's growing numbers – dynamics which undercut women's ability to participate as equals and thus potentially undermine recent policy initiatives like gender quotas to elect more women and give women greater voice in policy-making processes.

Keywords: gender and politics; gender quotas; critical mass theory; backlash theory

Over the last 20 years, the global average of women in national parliaments has nearly doubled, from 11.7% in 1997[1] – the year that the Inter-Parliamentary Union began publishing world rankings on its website – to 21.9% in 2014.[2] A crucial motor behind this change has been the widespread introduction of electoral gender quotas in diverse contexts around the globe (Krook 2009), driven by the emergence of new international norms supporting the goal of gender-balanced decision-making in the political sphere (Hughes, Krook, and Paxton, forthcoming; Krook and True 2012). In addition to arguments that women's participation is a matter of justice and fairness, many quota campaigns feature the concept of "critical mass," proposing that women are unlikely to have a major impact on political outcomes unless they constitute a "large minority" of elected representatives (cf. Dahlerup 1988). The intuition is that, in a phrase often attributed to Chilean President Michelle Bachelet, "One woman in politics changes the woman; but many women in politics changes politics." In other words, a substantial increase in elected women has the potential to transform the political agenda.

This claim has inspired a large body of theoretical and empirical work on the concept of "critical mass" in gender and politics research (among others, see Beckwith and Cowell-Meyers 2007; Bratton 2005; Childs and Krook 2006; Grey 2002; Kanthak and Krause 2012). Although some scholars uncover a positive relationship between women elected and the passage of policies favorable to women as a group (Kittilson 2008; Thomas 1994), other work notes that growing numbers may have the opposite effect (Carroll 2001; Crowley 2004). To resolve these mixed findings, a recent wave of contributions seeks to unpack these dynamics, distinguishing between the

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processes and outcomes of policy-making (Franceschet and Piscopo 2008; O'Brien 2012), delving into gendered norms within political institutions (Franceschet 2010; Kanthak and Krause 2012), and problematizing the notion of "women's interests" itself (Celis et al. 2014).

The present article by Karpowitz, Mendelberg, and Mattioli (2015) adds an important new layer to these methodological reflections. The authors revisit the seminal contributions of Kanter (1977a, 1977b) to focus on a thus far under-theorized aspect of her work: the *conditional effects* of women's increased presence in organizations. Advancing research on gender and institutions (Duerst-Lahti and Kelly 1995; Krook and Mackay 2011), they demonstrate that the impact of women's share of positions may be mediated by the use of different decision-making rules. When decisions are taken by majority vote, women's influence rises as their numbers increase. In contrast, when decisions are made by consensus, there is no similar effect: women enjoy more equal authority even when their numbers are small, with little change as their proportion grows. These dynamics, crucially, appear to hold only for women: men's authority and influence are not affected by their relative share of group members.

The article, therefore, provides an important corrective to prevailing assumptions regarding the links between women's numbers and political outcomes. My earlier work with Sarah Childs on "critical mass theory" shares this concern. Rereading Kanter, we note that she in fact offers three conjectures: (1) "with an increase in relative numbers, minority members are potentially allies, can form coalitions, and can affect the culture of the group;" (2) "with an increase in relative numbers, minority members begin to become individuals differentiated from each other;" and (3) "two … is not always a large enough number to overcome the problems of tokenism and develop supportive alliances, unless the tokens are highly identified with their own social group" (Kanter 1977a, 966, 987; see Childs and Krook 2008). In response, we propose shifting analytic attention to "critical actors," who work individually or collectively to bring about women-friendly policy change (Childs and Krook 2009). This reformulation, we argue, moves away from essentialist portrayals of "men" and "women" as political actors – thus recognizing at a theoretical level what has already been observed in political practice: not all women in politics prioritize the fight for women's rights, at the same time that some men in politics do. As such, the relationship between numbers and impact should be an empirical question, rather than a foregone conclusion.

While converging on the need to revisit the origins of critical mass theory and move the analysis down to the individual level, it might appear that we diverge from Karpowitz, Mendelberg, and Mattioli (2015) on the relationship between numbers and outcomes. Upon closer inspection, however, these two positions are in fact complementary to one another. Rather than advocating, as we do, process-tracing of the origins of particular policy reforms, they explore gendered opportunities and constraints for women to exercise political influence. They thus focus on the *process* of representation, leaving open questions about the *content* of women's legislative activity, as we advocate elsewhere (Celis et al. 2014). In addition, their article falls very much in line with an emerging body of the work on the barriers – gendered and non-gendered – affecting the ability of women to shape political deliberation. Walsh (2011) provides perhaps the closest parallel, theorizing that "access," or presence, is distinct from "voice," the extent to which group members are empowered to speak and contribute to political debates.

These questions have gained increased urgency in recent years with the rapid diffusion of quota policies to all corners of the globe. With quota campaigns have come various expectations – positive and negative – regarding the impact of increased numbers of women in elected office (Franceschet, Krook, and Piscopo 2012). Studies seeking to subject these claims to empirical investigation reveal that quotas are not a panacea. Quotas per se do not fully level the political playing field: they are introduced in gendered political environments, which often undercut women's ability to be selected as candidates and to exercise authority once elected (Bjarnegård 2013; Krook 2009; Palmieri 2011; Puwar

2004). As a party activist in Argentina stated to me, "quotas give women presence, but they do not give them power."[3] Barriers to women's entry and influence within the political realm are multifaceted, requiring a variety of simultaneous strategies to foster more equal conditions for political participation (Krook and Norris 2014; Markham 2012).

To date, therefore, there has been growing awareness of the complex dynamics surrounding the full integration of women into political life. This has led to more nuanced theorizing about the potential for women's enhanced access to translate into influence in policy debates and outcomes. Yet, largely missing from academic discussions, including the piece by Karpowitz, Mendelberg, and Mattioli (2015), is a fourth scenario in addition to the three identified by Kanter (1977a, 1977b). Rather than empowering women, growing numbers may generate various forms of resistance, undercutting women's ability to participate as equals. According to the concept of "intrusiveness" theorized by Blalock (1967), minorities may be viewed as nonthreatening and more easily accepted in environments when their numbers are small. As the number of minority members increases, however, majority groups may perceive a threat to their dominance, triggering a negative response toward the minority.

In a critique of Kanter's theory, Yoder thus suggests that, rather than there being "a tipping point beyond which additional numbers of women will reduce the negative effects of tokenism, the opposite may be true. Kanter's saleswomen may have felt the negative effects not of their small numbers but of their *increasing* numbers" (Yoder 1991, 185). As a result, she calls attention to "sexism … and its manifestations in higher-status men's attempts to preserve their advantage in the workplace" (1991, 189). A recent book by Kanthak and Krause (2012) addresses this dynamic, finding that an increase in a minority group's size in a legislature can lead to the devaluation of individual minority group members, creating an unintended backlash effect. They argue, consequently, that solving this "diversity paradox" requires attaining sufficient numbers *and* overcoming coordination problems among minority members.

Awareness of these dynamics, however, appears to be much greater among practitioners. Perhaps the most striking development over the last several years has been the growing attention by international nongovernmental organizations to acts of violence and harassment against female politicians (Bardall 2011; Herrera, Arias, and García 2011; iKnowPolitics 2007; Inter-Parliamentary Union 2014; National Democratic Institute 2014; South Asia Partnership International 2006; USAID 2013). Although all candidates and elected officials face criticisms and challenges, these reports call attention to behaviors directed at women with the purpose of leading them to withdraw from political life. In these cases, women have been duly selected as candidates or elected to a particular office, and then are actively prevented from carrying out their campaigns or fulfilling the mandates to which they have been elected, via various mechanisms of physical, psychological, symbolic, and economic coercion (Krook and Restrepo Sanin 2014).

These developments indicate a need for more explicit attention to backlash and resistance in research and activism on gender and political representation. Critical mass theory, as it is commonly understood, presents an optimistic account of women's political integration, equating increased presence with increased power to transform the political agenda. Yet gendered barriers remain, requiring further theorizing and data collection to identify these mechanisms and how they operate. Karpowitz, Mendelberg, and Mattioli (2015) offer an important step in this direction, highlighting how institutional rules may interact with gender norms to shape women's influence in decision-making spaces. This research matters for efforts to promote women's political empowerment as they continue to expand across the globe. Insights about backlash are not new, with copious evidence provided by quota scholars documenting the diverse and often creative tactics employed by opponents to avoid implementing quotas and weaken the legislative capacity of women elected via these policies (Cutts, Childs, and Fieldhouse 2008; Holli, Luhtakallio, and Raevaara 2006; Meier 2008; Verge and de la Fuente 2014). What is required now,

however, is work to better systematize and theorize these dynamics to ensure that initiatives such as quotas do not mask the continued political marginalization of women.

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Notes

1. Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Women in National Parliaments: Situation as of 1 January 1997," at http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/arc/world010197.htm.
2. Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Women in National Parliaments: Situation as of 1 December 2014," at http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm.
3. Interview, 6 August 2014.

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