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WHEN DOES WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION LEAD TO POLICY CHANGE?



When Does Women's Political Representation Lead to Policy Change?

Valeriya Mechkova

Development Dissertation Brief, 2024:05

to

The Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA)

Valeriya Mechkova defended her dissertation *Understanding the Conditions and Consequences of Women's Political Representation* in 2022 at the department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg. Her main research interests concern democracy and representation. Specifically, she is interested in understanding how representation and accountability can be used to improve the lives of ordinary people.

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Sammanfattning

Globalt sett har kvinnors deltagande i politiken och det civila samhället ökat under de senaste decennierna, vilket har påverkat både kvinnor och samhällen i stort. Min avhandling undersöker om och under vilka förutsättningar det ökade antalet kvinnor i politiken, så kallad ”deskriptiv representation”, påverkar den ”substantiella representationen” – politikområden som prioriteras av kvinnor. Argumentet är att kvinnors närvaro i politiken inte automatiskt leder till förändringar i de politiska utfallen, utan att de samhälleliga och institutionella villkoren för kvinnors närvaro också spelar roll. Min avhandling bygger på fem artiklar som använder jämförande och historiska dataset och visar att institutionella åtgärder, som könskvotering, förbättrar kvinnors substantiella representation. Aktiva kvinnoledda organisationer i det civila samhället kan också öka chanserna att kvinnors prioriteringar förverkligas. Detta förhållande är dock beroende av en viss nivå av demokratisk konkurrens och frånvaron av korrupcion. Sammantaget understryker avhandlingen att även om kvinnors politiska representation kan främja kvinnors intressen som grupp, kommer detta inte att ske utan specifika samhälleliga och institutionella villkor.

Abstract

Over recent decades, women's participation in politics and civil society has risen globally, impacting both women and societies at large. My dissertation examines whether and under what conditions the increased numbers of women in politics, termed 'descriptive representation', influences their substantive representation – policy areas prioritised by women. The argument is that women's presence in politics will not automatically lead to change in policy outcomes, but that the societal and institutional conditions under which this happens matter too. Drawing from five papers using comparative and historical datasets, my dissertation shows that institutional interventions, like gender quotas, enhance women's substantive representation. Active women-led civil society organisations can also increase the chances of women's priorities being realised. However, the relationship is conditioned on a certain level of democratic competition and on the absence of corruption. Overall, the dissertation underlines that while women's political representation can advance the interests of women as a group, this will not happen without specific societal and institutional conditions.

Introduction

Throughout the globe and through most of history, women have faced unequal position to men. Restrictions have been broad, from limiting property rights and employment to denying the opportunity for women to be part of politics. As part and parcel of these restrictions, women have often faced (and in many cases still do) worse living conditions, lower pay for the same job, and are more likely to live in poverty and hunger (UN Women, 2018).

In recent decades though, there has been a marked shift in focus. A watershed moment has been the Beijing Platform of Action (1995), which kick-started global attempts to improve the standing of women. By 2023, the average share of women in parliament has risen to 26,9%, a substantive improvement from the 5% of women in 1970 (IPU, 2024).

While parity in representation is not yet achieved, the rising numbers of women in politics in recent years raise the question of whether the increased political participation of women has had any effect on the politics and policies enacted around the world. In other words, while women's descriptive representation (the number of women participating in politics) has increased in recent decades, little is known about whether or how this has affected their substantive representation (their influence and policy-making ability). This brief will summarise the findings of my dissertation on this topic, and the dissertation was guided by these two research questions:

- Does descriptive representation of women (numerical presence) in politics have a positive impact on their substantive representation (the extent to which their policy priorities are implemented)?
- What institutional and societal factors condition this relationship?

Across five papers using historical and comparative datasets, the dissertation compares the effects of women's descriptive representation in politics on a comprehensive set of results: from policy outputs (e.g., spending priorities) to policy outcomes (e.g., infant mortality rates). Further, the dissertation theoretically clarifies and empirically tests the societal and institutional conditions that make it more or less likely for this descriptive-substantive link to work in practice. Finally, I compare the effects of representation of women in parliament to that in the highest political office – the chief executive.

The argument

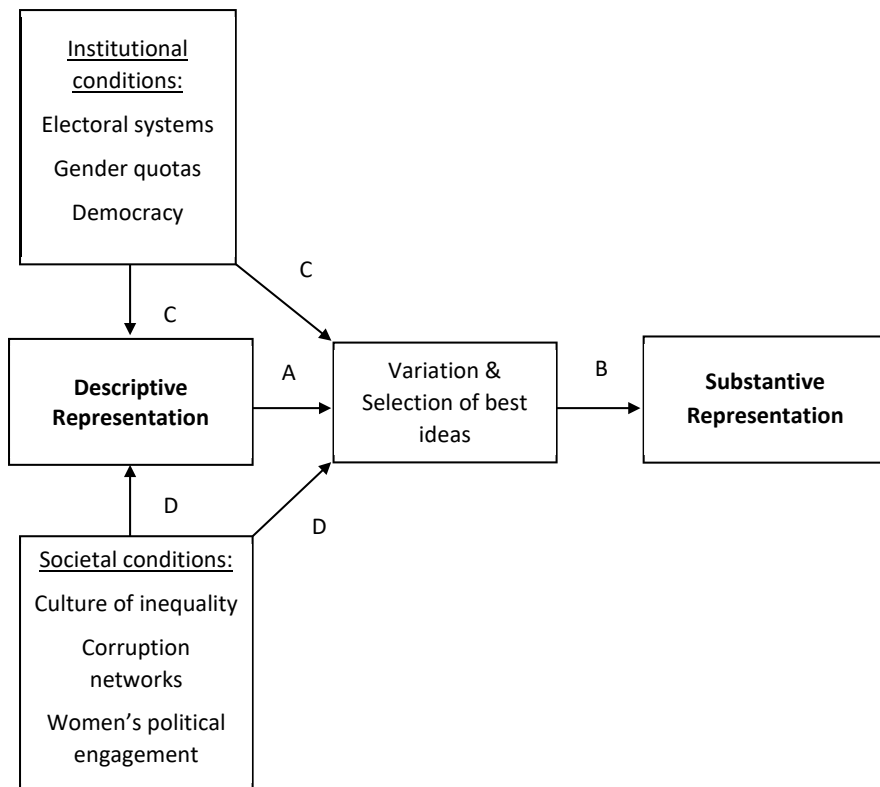
My dissertation departs from the theoretical argument and expectation that women's descriptive representation, measured by the number of women participating in political institutions, will translate into their substantive representation, where women representatives are able to advocate for their groups' interests and eventually, enact political changes (Mansbridge, 2005; Sapiro, 1981; Phillips, 1995).

Figure 1 presents a graphical illustration of the main steps of the argument used in this dissertation, namely, that women's presence in politics (descriptive representation) will result in observable changes to politics (substantive representation)¹. To connect descriptive and substantive representation, I argue that women's ability to freely express and advocate for themselves increases the number and variability of ideas produced and, eventually, implemented in governance (see link A in the model). This added value of women's participation is important due to two reasons: first) due to the simple mathematical calculation that half of society's talent is otherwise lost; and second) I argue and empirically test the proposition that the inclusion of

¹ The framework – descriptive and substantive representation is based on the work of Hannah Pitkin (1967).

women will create a qualitatively different output of governance (link B), which would thus indicate that women’s increased descriptive representation effects their substantive representation and their ability to influence policymaking.

Figure 1: Sketch of the main components and links in the argument



To test the observable implications of this argument, first I focus on the proposition that women will bring about a greater variation and selection of better ideas (link A). In the dissertation, a greater variety of ideas is proxied with technological change and is connected to subsequent impact on economic growth. Second, I study the advancements in healthcare, as this is a policy area more likely to be higher on the priority list of women compared to men. I contribute to clarifying several steps in the chain of representation across the papers: First, I study policy inputs, where the focus is on the extent to which women candidates for political office put focus on healthcare during electoral campaigns compared to men. Second, I study policy outputs in the form of budget allocations for healthcare. Finally, I study policy outcomes measured by infant and child mortality rates.

Further, the dissertation argues that informal and formal institutions influence the extent to which this link from representation to policies is realised in practice. I have organised the examined conditions into two sets: institutional and societal factors (links C and D in the model respectively). Certain factors, such as concentrated institutional effort to improve women's representation, competitiveness of elections, and robust civil society, will fast-track the realisation of women's interests when women politicians are present in politics. On the contrary, high levels of corruption, absence of competition in politics, and traditional gender norms stall the ability of women representatives to advance women's priorities.

Why representation matters

It has previously been argued that it is not enough for women to be given the right to choose their representatives, but that it also matters *who* those representatives are. Phillips (1995) introduces the theory of 'politics of presence' as a way of ensuring fair representation of social groups that have

previously been marginalised. Importantly, Phillips clarifies that although the descriptive-substantive link is not *guaranteed*, the presence of women in politics makes the realisation of their interests *most likely*. This means that women's interests are most likely represented better by women representatives than male ones, and this argument is based on the idea that, without the presence of historically marginalised groups, it is unlikely that decision-makers from the majority group would account for the interests of others, especially those in a relatively weaker power position (Reynolds, 2013).

The reason why women can be expected to represent other women are twofold. First, women politicians have a better grasp of women's preferences due to their own life experiences (Khan, 2017). The shared identity, experiences, and thus, 'being one of us' seals the representative's loyalty to 'our' interests (Mansbridge, 1999). Indeed, previous research from various geographic contexts shows that women politicians view women to be a special part of their constituency, and compared to men, have more frequent contact with women's organisations, and express a greater willingness to work for a gender equal society (Wängnerud, 2000; Thomas, 1994; Hawkesworth, 2003).

Second, women politicians' own preferences affect their every-day behaviour (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004). Politicians have a considerable autonomy and can rely on their own judgement as not all issues can be negotiated in pre-election campaigns. That is particularly important in light of the findings that, in practice, representatives rarely embrace the 'delegate role', meaning that they most often follow their own intuition and knowledge rather than attempting to simply carry responsibility of particular set of tasks (Reingold, 2008).

Taken together, these theoretical insights suggest that women (as a group) are more likely to have their interests accounted for in policy-making decisions if women are present within the political institutions. This notion is here used to support the hypothetical link between women's descriptive and substantive representation.

What are women's interests?

The importance of equal political representation is rooted in the idea that societal groups have distinct and politically relevant characteristics that only members of that groups can fully understand and represent. Women's representation is therefore justified as a means of ensuring that the interests of half of the population are taken into consideration in political decision-making processes.

However, a challenge with this perspective is that representatives typically do not advocate solely for the interests of one specific group; rather, they aim to serve the broader community or nation (Lovenduski, 2005). Additionally, given the intersectionality of the female experience, women as a political group encompass individuals from diverse backgrounds across various politically relevant characteristics such as education, ethnicity, and social class. Therefore, it is logical to consider that women's interests are not uniform but vary significantly depending on which groups or individuals are being considered and the specific time-period in question.

One could reasonably argue that it is a challenge on its own to demonstrate that women indeed possess specific interests as a group. Scholars in fact caution against essentialist assumptions that presume a universally fixed female identity with concrete policy preferences (Franceschet and Piscopo, 2008). Instead, we should recognise that there are no biologically predetermined shared interests among women as a group, but a common framework shaped by human agency – specific political, economic, and social factors that define women's life options (Beckwith, 2014).

So, after reviewing the literature, can we distil a set of women's interests? Arguably, social positioning determines the different understandings of societal problems and solutions among different groups (Young, 2002). Historically, many societies have upheld norms where the public sphere, including politics

and governance, was reserved for men while women were expected to manage the private sphere – mainly family and home responsibilities (Krook, 2017; Phillips, 1995). This has led to unequal roles for women, who have shouldered most unpaid work while being excluded from political and economic power (Phillips, 1995).

In sum, the literature identifies three broad categories that, given women's historical and current subordination to men, ought to constitute women's specific interests: 1) civil and political rights; 2) caregiving obligations to others; and 3) issues pertaining to their own bodies.

Throughout the papers, I focus on healthcare as a proxy for women's interests for three main reasons. First, women on average take a disproportionate share of caretaking obligations of others, including children, but also elderly and others who might be in need (Box-Steffensmeier et al., 2004). This means that when healthcare services fail, women tend to take the biggest burden. Second, empirical research shows that across different contexts, women voters and politicians prioritise healthcare over other development issues (Clayton et al., 2019; Wängnerud, 2000). Third, previous studies on the topic consistently use healthcare as a proxy for women's interests (Clayton and Zetterberg, 2018; Miller, 2008; Swiss et al., 2012). By choosing this approach, I am not able to cover all needs enlisted in the classification. Yet, I am able to compare my work to the previous body of the gender and politics literature and enrich our understanding of the determinants of one key development outcome – healthcare.

How can women politicians make a difference?

Most studies examining the descriptive-substantive link primarily focus on the legislature and argue that women legislators can promote women's interests through various means, by for example:

- Lifting women's issues in political discussions and parliamentary debates (Devlin and Elgie, 2008; Yoon, 2011)
- Forming coalitions around women's issues across party lines and with grassroots movements (Johnson and Josefsson, 2016)
- Enacting specific legislation (Wang, 2013; Thomas, 1994)
- Allocating budget resources for programs benefiting women (Clayton and Zetterberg, 2018).

Traditionally in the literature, substantive representation is defined as the simple process of presenting women's interests to political institutions, regardless of what the outcome is (Franceschet and Piscopo, 2008). The rationale is that changing political outcomes does not solely rely on women as actors. However, I argue that representation becomes most meaningful when descriptive representation not only influences attitudes and individual behaviour (areas of primary research focus so far), but also leads to tangible changes in real-world outcomes. This is the primary focus of my dissertation. Recognising that representatives operate within constraining environments, success depends on various factors. My goal is to understand the conditions that determine successful outcomes of representation, which I refer to as 'substantive representation' throughout the dissertation.

Methods and data

The proposed arguments are tested across five papers using comparative and historical datasets. Four of the papers are comparative, examining up to 182 countries, with paper five focusing on the electoral campaign of the US in 2016, and paper number three zooming in on Africa. My studies, as a rule, rely on long time-series with the longest timeframe examined stretching back to 1789 (paper one). The argument of that paper is quite broad, showing that institutions that allow for women's empowerment generate broader and better

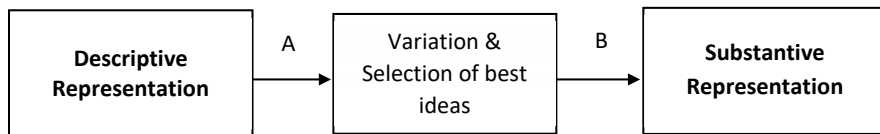
ideas in governance, resulting in faster economic growth. Paper two examines a relatively recent timeframe, 2000 to 2016, as here the institution in focus is the executive, an institution that has rarely been occupied by women in history.

More information on the methods and data collection of the separate papers and a full account of the co-authors of each paper can be found in the published dissertation.

Link between descriptive and substantive representation

The papers included in my dissertation provide several perspectives on the question of whether women’s descriptive representation (i.e., the number of women in politics) have a positive impact on their substantive representation (i.e., the nature of the politics). This section will provide a summary of the findings regarding this link, as illustrated by figure 2.

Figure 2: Link between descriptive and substantive representation



The first paper of the dissertation makes a broad argument that institutions promoting women’s political empowerment can impact economic growth through technological advancement. This occurs because women’s inclusion enhances the quality and quantity of innovative ideas introduced into the economy. We find strong evidence that women’s political empowerment is correlated with subsequent growth in GDP per capita and technological

change. This relationship holds across various model specifications. The paper provides concrete examples to illustrate the magnitude of this effect, showing that moving from the first quartile score on women's political empowerment (e.g., 0.20, akin to Italy in the 1930s) to the third quartile score (e.g., 0.61, comparable to Australia in the 1950s) is associated with an increase of approximately 0.9 percentage points in GDP per capita growth. Over a decade, this difference translates into a substantial 9-percentage-point difference in GDP per capita growth between these hypothetical scenarios. The findings of the paper present a new 'business case' for women's empowerment, supplementing the normative arguments for equal inclusion of women in societal and political life.

Paper number 2 delves into the impact of having a woman chief executive on domestic healthcare expenditure. In this paper, I argue that the existing literature on representation and governance has often overlooked the pivotal role that chief executives play in setting government priorities, especially regarding budget allocation. The analysis reveals a statistically significant relationship between having a woman head of state or head of government and subsequent changes in healthcare spending. This correlation holds across various statistical models. Importantly, the association is observed primarily when women hold positions of substantive power, such as head of state or head of government, rather than ceremonial roles like vice-presidents.

Paper number 3 reveals a consistent association between the proportion of women in parliament and reduced infant and child mortality rates. Additionally, it provides evidence that one pathway through which women MPs act to achieve women policy priorities is through resource mobilisation, namely by allocating higher budgets for the healthcare sector.

In paper 5 we analyse tweets from candidates for national office (congress and gubernatorial positions) during the 2018 U.S. mid-term elections. This part of the dissertation demonstrates that even in contemporary times, women

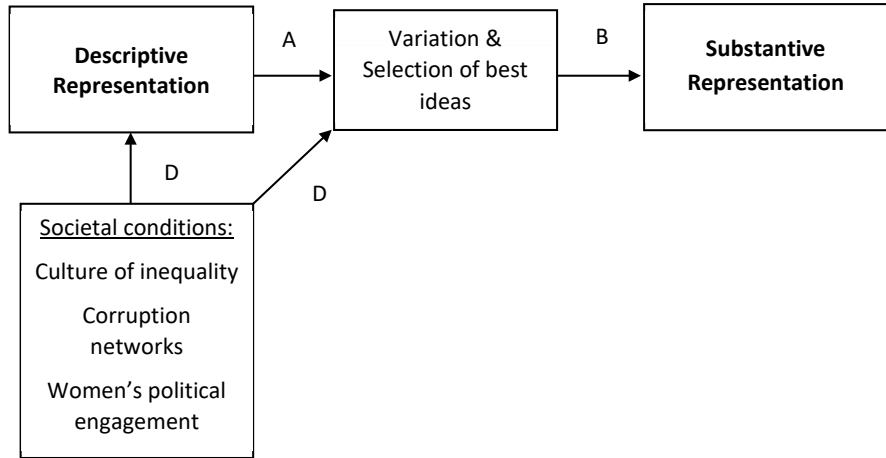
candidates predominantly focus on issues traditionally associated with women, such as social and family issues, healthcare, education, LGBT rights, and sexual assault. Our models estimate that being a woman candidate increased the expected proportion of mentions of these woman-centric topics from 15 to 23 per cent, a statistically significant difference that persists after accounting for important covariates such as political ideology, candidate age, incumbency, and prior experience. In contrast, women candidates discuss traditionally male-oriented topics like the economy, national security, or immigration less frequently than men, who extensively cover these issues. These findings are significant given the unequal representation of women in politics and the tendency for women's issues to receive less attention during political campaigns (Evans and Clark, 2016). Our results suggest that women strategically use social media to shape discourse, present themselves as well-rounded candidates, and advocate for women's group interests.

Taken together, these papers demonstrate that women successfully represent and change policies and politics to better reflect women's issues, thereby providing evidence for a link between women's descriptive and substantive representation. The next section summarises the conditions that make this relationship more or less likely and highlights the importance of understanding the societal and institutional context in which women representatives work in order to predict their effect on policy outputs and outcomes.

Societal conditions influencing women's descriptive and substantive representation

The papers of my dissertation find three main societal conditions that can enable or inhibit women's descriptive representation from resulting in their substantive effect on policy, namely, a culture of inequality, corruption, and women's political engagement (see figure 3). These will be discussed separately in the sections below.

Figure 3: Societal conditions for women's descriptive and substantive representation



Culture of inequality

A patriarchal culture of discrimination has led to men being the norm in public life, politics, and economics, leaving women to traditionally care for the private sphere (Htun and Weldon, 2010; Krook, 2017). Because of that division, women experience a specific set of constraints when trying to enter politics – at a minimum, they face stereotypes of being weak or unfit, and at worst, face psychological or physical harassment (Mansbridge and Shames, 2008).

In Paper 5, we directly address gender stereotyping and violence in politics. The paper argues that women face pervasive gender stereotypes when their personal characteristics are evaluated. Traditional stereotypes expect women to embody qualities like kindness, warmth, compassion, and family orientation (Lee and Lim, 2016; Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993), which are in conflict with

the qualities valued in leaders – strength, assertiveness, efficiency, and goal-orientation (Lee and Lim, 2016; Alexander and Andersen, 1993). Consequently, women candidates often encounter gender-related prejudice, as effective leadership contradicts the traditional gender norms for women (Lee and Lim, 2016). Experimental studies show that task-oriented, agentic, and competent women are perceived more negatively as leaders and are viewed as lacking warmth and niceness (Fiske et al., 2002; Rudman and Glick, 2001). Additionally, voters tend to believe that male candidates excel in handling traditionally masculine issues like foreign policy and crime, while women are perceived as better suited for social issues such as healthcare and education (Alexander and Andersen, 1993). This can lead to the perception that women candidates only represent specific group interests and not society at large (Diekmann et al., 2002). Moreover, women-focused issues receive less attention from mainstream media, potentially diminishing the visibility of women candidates (Kahn and Fridkin, 1996).

Therefore, the paper argues that the perpetuation of a culture of patriarchal dominance and traditional societal roles poses significant barriers to women's meaningful participation in politics as a group. Stereotypes can undermine women's electability and lead to various forms of backlash, including online bullying, mockery, threats, and even physical violence or sexual assault (Krook, 2017). Paper five provides evidence that women candidates for office encounter disproportionately more hate messages on X (formerly Twitter), particularly when they defy gender stereotypes. These findings together suggest that effective women's representation, measured in their ability to enact policy change, requires the dismantlement of gender inequality in terms of patriarchal and misogynistic norms and values.

Level of corruption

In Paper 4, we argue that the effectiveness of descriptive representation depends on the levels of corruption within a country. Specifically, we suggest that positive political outcomes resulting from women's improved representation in politics are likely to be constrained to countries with low levels of corruption. In contrast, in contexts characterised by rampant corruption, greater female representation may have negative effects on the very development outcomes that their presence aims to improve (Nistotskaya and Stensöta, 2018). That could happen in contexts where there is no "room for women to maneuver" (Stensöta and Wängnerud, 2018, p. 4) to make a difference based on their experience and policy programs. Bjarnegård et al. (2018) warn that if candidates, appointed through gender quotas, are selected from an existing corrupt political network, they will continue to follow the same corrupt party line. That could happen because informal male party elites use nepotism to advance women that they can control (relatives or politically inexperienced women) (Nistotskaya and Stensöta, 2018; Franceschet and Piscopo, 2008). In this setting, advancement in politics is arranged through informal channels, demanding women politicians to follow the political lines drawn by the patrons.

For instance, in Russia, women in the national legislature adhere closely to directives from male patrons, supporting traditional values over advancing women's policy interests, as seen in the case of the decriminalisation of domestic violence (Nistotskaya and Stensöta, 2018). Similarly, Franceschet and Piscopo (2008) demonstrate that women's presence in the legislature in Argentina did not translate into increased political power to affect meaningful change and argued that this was due to the high levels of corruption in the legislature.

Studying the effect of women's political empowerment on infant mortality rates, which is traditionally presumed to be a 'women's issues' and thereby a proxy for women's substantive representation, the findings suggests that the

effect is contingent on the level of corruption in the country. We observe that only at relatively low corruption levels (around 0.6 on a 0 to 1 scale) does women's empowerment have a statistically significant negative effect on reducing infant mortality. This indicates that under conditions of low-quality governance, increasing women's numerical representation does not lead to improved representation of group interests. Instead, women's representation could be used as a facade by the ruling elite to pursue narrow clientelist interests that hinder development. We also find that reducing instances of corruption significantly predicts improved infant mortality rates, but this effect is evident only when men do not hold a near-monopoly of political power. This therefore suggests that interventions aimed to promote women's representation will ultimately fail to produce substantive political change unless they account for and simultaneously combat institutions that uphold corrupt and clientelist networks.

Women's political engagement

Finally, Paper 3 proposes that the link between descriptive and substantive representation is strengthened when women's political engagement is higher. The paper introduces the concept of 'gendered accountability', suggesting that the accountability between women politicians and their constituents is particularly strong. From the perspective of citizens, symbolic representation is considered significant, as the presence of women politicians challenges stereotypes that politics is exclusively a 'man's game' (Simien, 2015). Previous studies have indicated that increased women's representation in politics enhances political engagement among women citizens (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004; Barnes and Burchard, 2013). This heightened participation is crucial, as civil society actors contribute to the effectiveness of institutions, including parliaments (Goetz and Jenkins, 2005; Mechkova et al., 2018;

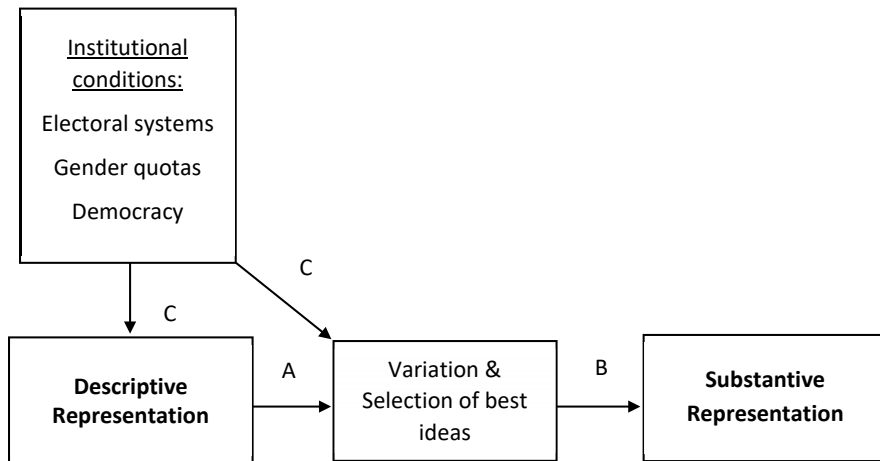
Lührmann et al., 2020). Consequently, civil society activism has the potential to influence policy directions and strengthen both informational and sanctioning aspects of accountability (Goetz et al., 2008; Lührmann et al., 2020).

Looking at the societal conditions, the dissertation theorises that the mobilisation of women citizens can affect the descriptive-substantive link. Civil society mobilisation should help to enhance the effectiveness of formal institutions in two ways: 1) by helping to crystallise and inform what constitutes the women group interest, and 2) by increasing the threat of sanctioning in cases when the expectations of representation are not met (Goetz et al., 2008; Mechkova et al., 2018; Weldon, 2002). The empirical evidence tested across two papers (Papers 1 and 3) finds robust support for that argument, thereby indicating that civil liberties and an active civil society are essential aspects in promoting women's effective political representation and their ability to enact policy change that represent women's interests.

Institutional conditions affecting women's descriptive and substantive representation

Paper 3 examines the institutional determinants of substantive representation and how these effect the link between the numerical representation of women and their ability to affect policy change. The paper argues that the link between descriptive and substantive representation is conditioned on formal representation, namely, the type of electoral system, quotas, and levels of democracy (as depicted in figure 4 below). These institutional conditions will be described separately in the following sections.

Figure 4: Institutional conditions for women’s descriptive and substantive representation of women



Electoral systems

Building on previous research, the dissertation explores how the institutional setup shapes the process of feminising politics (Lovenduski, 2005). Previous research shows that single-member electoral systems tend to produce two-party systems that overrepresent the majority, whereas proportional electoral systems often lead to multi-party systems that better represent minority interests, including women’s (Williams, 2000). Studying Germany, Höhmann (2019) argues that proportional systems are more likely to produce women’s substantive representation, because the system allow women to be less reliant on local responsibilities for re-election and get tangled in party politics and instead focus on entrepreneurial initiatives, including focusing on women’s interests.

Gender quotas

The adoption of gender quotas is the most efficient mechanism to ensure women's representation in politics. The literature suggests that quotas can create a 'mandate effect', compelling women MPs to advocate for women's interests (Franceschet and Piscopo, 2008). In a competing view, political elites can use quotas for strategic purposes. Authoritarian governments may use gender quotas to try to appear more liberal and democratic but in practice, autocrats maintain tight control over who gets nominated (Donno and Kreft, 2018; Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, 2016; Bush and Zetterberg, 2020). Additionally, representatives elected through quotas may face challenges in prestige, being labelled 'quota women' and may be sidelined by party leadership (Franceschet and Piscopo, 2008). Overall, existing research presents mixed findings on the institutional effects on substantive representation.

Paper 3 finds that, on average, institutions facilitating descriptive representation promote substantive representation as they enable women to enter politics and advocate for policy change, and therefore supports the introduction of quotas as a means of improving both women's descriptive and, in turn, substantive representation. This conclusion contrasts with perspectives suggesting that quotas and proportional systems produce 'second-class' politicians (Zetterberg, 2008; Barnes, 2016).

Democracy

The final argument focuses on democracy as a condition. Specifically, democratic institutions should enhance the likelihood that descriptive representation translates into substantive representation by strengthening the accountability link between politicians and their constituents (Williams, 2000). In democratic contexts, constituents have the opportunity to hold elected representatives accountable for meeting their expectations, and failure to do so

could result in politicians losing the next election (Olson, 2000). We could relate that mechanism to the literature on representation to argue that, thanks to symbolic representation, women citizens could raise their expectations towards the elected women representatives, and elections could be used as a checkpoint for ensuring that their interests are met.

In a competing view, advancing women's rights may not clash with autocratic interests. Autocrats often prioritise limiting political freedoms but may permit representatives to act in certain policy areas deemed non-threatening (Forman-Rabinovici and Sommer, 2019). Previous research suggests that women politicians in both autocratic and democratic regimes can advance women's priorities (Khan, 2017; Wang et al., 2018). This finding may be explained by the perception that some women's interests are not threatening to autocrats, who may allow progress in certain dimensions to appeal to domestic audiences (Forman-Rabinovici and Sommer, 2019).

Balancing these competing arguments, my work shows that higher percentage of women legislators is associated with increased healthcare spending across all regimes. This suggests that indeed all women politicians are able to change policy outputs, regardless of the regime type under which they serve. However, when we look at policy outcomes, measured with maternal mortality, we find that the extent to which descriptive representation leads to improvements in substantive representation is dependent on regime type. Specifically, women's health outcomes do not improve with women's descriptive representation in closed autocracies. The results for democracies and electoral autocracies are similar, suggesting that even limited vertical accountability through semi-competitive elections may facilitate substantive representation of women.

Conclusion

To conclude, the dissertation underlines several important points that can be summarised as follows:

- Including women in political decision-making has overall benefits for the development of societies as measured with economic growth and improved healthcare outcomes for women and children.
- When women are represented in politics, women's issues are discussed more often and widely, including during electoral campaigns.
- Having a woman chief executive and higher number of women in parliament is associated with higher budgets for healthcare.
- Societal and institutional conditions frame the extent to which the presence of women in politics makes a difference for policy outcomes.
- Institutional efforts to improve women's representation, such as quotas or adopting a proportional electoral system, enhance substantive representation of women as well.
- Women politicians are more likely to improve the substantive representation of women in countries with robust civil society.
- Corruption can undermine efforts to improve women's representation.
- Only under conditions of low corruption, higher representation of women is associated with reduced infant and child mortality; where corruption is high, clientelist networks prevail despite women entering politics.
- Democratic competition is another condition for seeing women's substantive representation.
- Across all regime types, the presence of women is associated with more budgets for healthcare but in closed autocracies, the increase of women in parliament does not help to reduce outcomes such as maternal mortality.

Taken together, these insights highlight the importance of promoting women's political representation and the beneficial effects it has on both policy outputs and outcomes when it comes to changing 'traditionally' female policy issues. However, this relationship is evident only in contexts with strong democratic institutions, low levels of corruptions, a lack of gender unequal values and norms, and a strong civil society. Practitioners working to promote these values ought therefore to adopt a holistic view of the societal and institutional contexts in which women representatives work and to promote the strengthening of democratic institutions in order to fully support gender equality in politics.

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How does an increase in female political representation affect the promotion of women's interests in politics and policy, and under what conditions can we expect women politicians to positively influence policymaking? This thesis explores the link between women's descriptive and substantive representation and the institutional and societal factors that condition this relationship.

Hur påverkar en ökad kvinnlig politisk representation främjandet av kvinnors intressen inom politik och policy, och under vilka förhållanden kan vi förvänta oss att kvinnliga politiker har ett positivt inflytande på beslutsfattandet? I denna avhandling undersöks sambandet mellan kvinnors beskrivande och substantiella representation och de institutionella och samhällsliga faktorer som påverkar detta förhållande?

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