

Women in Parliament

Robin Turner

Bilkent University

Author Note

This paper was prepared in response to the following prompt: *In spite of advances in women's rights over the last century, the number of female members of European national parliaments remains very low. Analyze this problem and suggest solutions.*

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Despite universal suffrage and the prominence of a few female leaders such as Margaret Thatcher and Gro Harlem Brundtland, women's representation in legislative bodies throughout Europe remains surprisingly low, especially at the national level. Even in Scandinavian countries, which have the best record on women's rights overall, women make up only 30-40% of members of parliament (MP's), while in other countries the situation is worse, with women rarely holding more than a quarter of parliamentary seats, the lowest numbers being in the UK, France and Greece, where women make up less than 10% of MP's. It is therefore reasonable to ask whether changes to political processes may be necessary in order to improve this rather dismal situation.

There are, however, some who would argue that the problem is exaggerated or even non-existent. Not all social groups are represented in parliaments in proportion to their numbers; for example, there are few working class MP's, few young people and no children. A traditional liberal argument is that since women are able to vote, we should not complain if they choose to be represented by men rather than women. This argument, however, betrays a certain naivety concerning political processes. An election is not a neutral procedure whereby voters choose whichever citizen they like to represent them; candidates are carefully selected and promoted by an entrenched party apparatus which is itself male-dominated.

Another denial of the problem consists of saying that female under-representation is simply the result of differing male and female characters, a view argued by Stephen Goldberg in *Male Dominance: the Inevitability of Patriarchy*. From this sociobiological viewpoint, women are less aggressive and power-oriented, and thus do not compete so vigorously for positions of authority. Even if this were true, however, this does not mean that aggressiveness and hunger for

power are *desirable* qualities in political leaders. If women are losing out because of their more co-operative and egalitarian natures, it might be more, not less, appropriate to arrange things so that there were more of them in government.

If we leave biology to one side, there seem to be three factors working against higher representation of women in parliaments: male attitudes towards women and to the political process in general, women's attitudes to political activity, and physical and economic constraints on political participation. Regarding male attitudes, there is a consensus among feminists that politics is to a large extent a "boys' game", run for and by men who, consciously or not, discourage women from joining in the fun. While this was certainly the case half a century ago, and may still be the case in more male-dominated countries and conservative parties, I would argue that this is a factor of decreasing significance. A point worth noting is that left-wing parties tend to have a higher proportion of female candidates. This might imply that men are beginning to pay more than lip service to feminism, and where the Left goes, the Right may well follow. Nevertheless, the tendency of politics to follow a predominantly male discourse style (i.e. a masculine way of talking, problem-solving and confrontation) still discourages many women from entering conventional politics.

Another important factor is the infamous "double standard", by which the actions of men and women are judged differently. Women in politics are expected to behave like men, but if they do, are accused of being "unfeminine", a problem which often confronted the "Iron Lady", Margaret Thatcher. A man who gets angry is "forceful": a woman who behaves in exactly the same way is "aggressive" or "shrill". Similarly, while men may occasionally be censured for their sexual behavior (Bill Clinton being the most famous case) the effects on women may be

more devastating. Few women would want every detail of their previous sexual relationships investigated by the media.

Turning to attitudes of women themselves, it is not surprising that the "boy's' game" image of politics, and the general view of it as a ruthless and dirty business, discourages women from submitting themselves as candidates. This may also in part explain the greater participation of women in non-conventional politics, such as environmental issues. Women may feel either intimidated or repelled by the power struggles involved in and between political parties. There are also factors in female socialization that encourage women to take a supporting rather than a leading role, so that even when they join political parties, there is a tendency for them to campaign for male candidates rather than promoting themselves.

Finally, there are constraints imposed by the nature of political work. Even in the most "advanced" societies, the bulk of childcare is carried out by women. Promoting oneself as a candidate requires a huge investment of time, which may not be practical for women with children. Once elected, the job involves long and irregular hours and a large amount of travelling (one reason why women are better represented in local than in national politics). Taking time out of a political career to raise children may mean that a woman "misses the boat": by the time she is able to resume active political life, she is in danger of being passed over in favor of younger (male) candidates.

Solutions to the problem of female under-representation can be divided into those which attempt to make it easier for women to succeed in the present political system and those which aim to reform the system itself. In the former case, most work involves changing attitudes of both men and women. This is, of course, part of a much wider process of social change. In terms of male attitudes, it is no longer possible to claim that male voters will not vote for women, or

that male politicians will not take orders from one. The experience of the Thatcher years conclusively proved that the opposite was the case; Thatcher's motto might well have been, after Machiavelli, that it is better to be feared than loved. However, there is a long way to go before such grudging respect is extended from a few political stars to female politicians in general, and a successful female politician is seen as more than an honorary man.

Changing women's attitudes is again part of a general consciousness-raising process. Much work has been done since the 1960's to encourage women to reject their traditional passive or nurturing role and take a more active part in political life, but this has had its greatest impact *outside* the parliamentary arena, in areas such as single-issue campaigns, community work, and of course the women's movement itself. Entering parliament is very like entering a male-dominated workplace, the difference being that a woman who successfully enters a male profession can at least look forward to a higher salary.

Consciousness raising on the part of women can only go so far; it is up to political parties to make themselves more attractive to women if they want more, and more active, female members. The fact that it is now *possible* to reach high positions is not enough; women need to feel that they stand a good chance of rising in the party ranks. This is a particular problem for left-wing parties. Conservative parties may be quite happy to keep the majority of women in supporting roles, since they do not generally subscribe to a feminist ideology in any case, but left-wing parties promise more to women, and so need to work harder to keep these promises. Parties can improve their image by giving more publicity to successful women within their ranks, but this of course presupposes that there are enough successful women to publicize.

This brings us to the question of institutional change: reforming the system rather than simply trying to work within it. Proposed reforms usually take the form of a quota system, either

at a party level or at the constitutional level. Many parties in Europe require that a certain proportion of parliamentary candidates be women. At present thirteen parties in EU states have definite quotas (although usually less than the 50% one would logically expect) and some others, such as the British Labour Party and Ireland's Fine Gael, have set themselves targets for female representation in the near future. An alternative to a simple quota is the "zipper system", whereby male and female names alternate on party lists in proportional representation systems. This has been particularly successful in Sweden, and partially accounts for the high number of women MP's there.

A quota system does, however, have certain disadvantages; the main one being that it may sometimes mean that talented male candidates may lose out to women whose main qualification is their gender. If a party which does not already have a large number of talented and experienced female members institutes a quota system, it not only risks creating resentment amongst its male members, but, if it puts forward inexperienced or unsuitable women candidates, risks losing seats in elections.

For this reason, it has been suggested that a quota system apply not to parties, but to parliament itself. At present, no EU member state has a quota for seats in parliament, and this is hardly surprising considering the electoral questions this would raise. What, for example, would happen if the electorate voted overwhelmingly for male candidates; would some of the winners then be forced to give up their seats to women who had actually received fewer votes? The only imaginable alternative would be to have an even number of seats for each constituency, half reserved for men and half for women, giving, in effect, two parliaments. In the unlikely event that this were accepted, it would then raise the question of whether there should be seats reserved for members of different ethnic groups or ages, for example. However, in Finland and Denmark

legislation exists to ensure that membership of parliamentary committees and advisory bodies have equal or near-equal numbers of men and women.

Electoral systems themselves have an impact on female representation. By far the worst, from women's point of view, is the first past the post system, where in each constituency there is only one candidate from each party and election is by a simple majority. This encourages parties to play safe, which often means avoiding female candidates, and this may explain the surprisingly low number of women MP's in the UK. Where proportional representation is used, according to the EU Directorate-General for Research, women do better in a closed list system (i.e. where voters choose a party list but not individual members) than a preferential system (where voters select individual candidates from the party lists). Countries that have a mixed or weak proportional representation system tend to have fewer female MP's than those which solely employ proportional representation.

A more radical solution, which so far has not received serious consideration, would be a return to the Athenian system of election by lot. If the purpose of a parliament is to represent the people, it is possible to argue that the most representative group would be one chosen randomly, or at least stochastically, i.e. by first creating a pool of suitable candidates for office according to whichever criteria are thought important, then choosing from these at random. One objection to this system is that however strict the criteria are, one risks selecting people who are mentally or ideologically unstable, but the same criticism could be made of the present electoral system. A more serious objection is that modern government is a much more complex business than the affairs of an ancient Greek city-state, and candidates selected by lot would have little political or administrative expertise. However, there seems to be no reason why this method should not be applied to the upper house of a bicameral legislature, so that the experienced politicians could

still draft legislation while a more representative sample of the people would have the option of vetoing it.

Leaving aside such drastic reforms, there are a few smaller but more practical steps which can be taken immediately. It is a dismal fact that many parliaments still have no childcare facilities, an absence which in itself might prevent some women from carrying out their parliamentary duties. Similarly, political parties could themselves provide better childcare facilities, and time meetings so as better to fit in with the schedules of parents and with the kind of work which women do. In addition, the rules of debate in parliament could be altered to encourage a less and male-oriented discourse style. Few European parliaments witness the physical fights which are common in some other countries, but parliamentary procedure and even the physical layout of parliament chambers tends to encourage a style of debate which consists largely of trading insults between one side of the house and the other. Even a rule of parliamentary procedure to penalize MP's for shouting would go a long way. While few would suggest that MP's sit on cushions in a circle and hold hands before and after debates, a less confrontational and macho style of debate would do much to make politics less male-oriented. Women are not fragile creatures who need to be protected from aggressive men, but uncivilized standards of debate lend themselves to dominance by "alpha males" and have made some parliaments resemble a tribe of chimpanzees more than a group of rational human beings.

In conclusion, the problem of female under-representation has multiple causes and can thus have no single solution. In the short term, the practical measures just described can be implemented, and electoral reform instituted to adopt a closed list proportional representation system. This would then make it easier for political parties to adopt a quota or target system for female candidates. In the long term, more serious questions need to be raised about the whole

nature of the political process. We assume that democracy is best served by an extremely competitive procedure in which candidates advertise themselves (at considerable expense in terms of time and money) to an electorate, then once elected, fight it out between themselves. This not only excludes the majority of women from political participation, but also the majority of reasonable citizens of either sex. Perhaps, then, it is less a question of *feminizing* politics than of *humanizing* it.