Democratic Theory and the Representation of Women

While for years political scientists devoted very little attention to questions regarding the representation of women, such questions have considerable contemporary relevance. Recent developments both in the political system and in political science itself have made representation of women a concern for political scientists of varying theoretical persuasions.

Two developments have led to a greater concern with the numerical representation of women—the emergence of the feminist movement in the political system, and increased attention to the need for reincorporation of classical democratic ideals in political science. The recent growth of the feminist movement also has drawn attention to the importance of questions relating to the representation of the interests of women.

The Feminist Movement and Numerical Representation

Political scientists who adopt some type of democratic theoretical perspective can be arrayed along a continuum, according to their views about the desirability of greater citizen participation and involvement in the governance of society. The views of most political scientists interested in the study of American politics undoubtedly fall somewhere between the two extremes, but many lean more toward one end of the continuum than the other.

The emergence and growth of the contemporary feminist movement should lead directly to a concern with the numerical representation of women for those at one end of the continuum. These are democratic elitists who would seem content with a relatively passive role (i.e., one no
more active than today) for the public. The views of individual scholars such as Thomas Dye, Joseph Schumpeter, Giovanni Sartori, and Bernard Berelson would seem to fall very near this end of the continuum. Yet, perhaps the clearest embodiment of this perspective exists more as a composite caricature in the works of critics, such as Bachrach and Walker, than in the work of any single theorist. Bachrach, for example, has claimed that among democratic elitists, “the political passivity of the great majority of the people is not regarded as an element of democratic malfunctioning, but on the contrary, as a necessary condition for allowing the creative functioning of the elites.” Similarly, Walker has maintained that democratic elitists believe, “If the . . . masses participate in large numbers, democratic self-restraint will break down and peaceful competition among the elites, the central concern in elitist theory, will become impossible.”

While some might argue, as Dahl does, that such beliefs are not held in extreme form by any of the theorists whom Bachrach and Walker cite, scholars who view elites as the primary guardians of democratic values, and the mass public as a potential threat to the preservation of those values, might well be concerned about the large numbers of women who have been mobilized by the feminist movement. The public is likely to remain relatively passive and to allow “business as usual” only as long as elites are able to generate widespread mass support. And the participation of thousands of women in the contemporary feminist movement can be viewed as a sign that the existing elites have failed to inspire such support. Thomas Dye has explained:

It is essential that individuals in the masses feel that they have the opportunity to rise to positions in the elite. . . . A caste system which withholds any opportunity for, or erects artificial (for example, racial) barriers to, individual advancement among the masses cannot inspire mass support.

Increasing the number of women among governing elites has been a major concern of many feminist organizations. It is this concern that led, in part, to the creation of the Women’s Campaign Fund, a political action committee that raises and distributes money to women candidates. It is this concern that led, in part, to the formation of the National Women’s Education Fund, which among other functions conducts educational programs to facilitate the entry of women into elite positions. It is this concern that has led the National Women’s Political Caucus and its state and local chapters to mobilize members to work in the campaigns of women candidates, to endorse the candidacies of women, and to contribute
money to their campaigns. Finally, concern for increasing the number of women among governing elites was the motivating factor that led more than fifty organizations to join together to form a Coalition for Women's Appointments in late 1976. The coalition submitted names and lobbied for the appointment of women to both the Carter and the Reagan administrations.

The slow rate of progress in achieving elective and appointive offices for women is the fuel that feeds these efforts. The few women elected or appointed to governmental positions, relative to the number qualified to hold these positions, does not lead to the feeling, critical according to Dye, that women in the general citizenry have sufficient opportunity to rise to elite positions. Feminist activists do not perceive the political system to be as open to women as it is to men.

Because of the failure of contemporary elites to provide equitable numerical representation for women, the underrepresentation of women among governing elites is an issue that should concern political scientists who are sympathetic to the democratic elitist point of view. Unless women attain a much larger proportion of elective and appointive positions, the support of active feminists is not likely to be regained. Rather, feminists are likely to continue to exert considerable pressure on, and thus to interfere with the functioning of, existing political elites.

**Renewed Interest in Classical Ideals and Numerical Representation**

While the growth of the feminist movement has made numerical representation of women an issue of importance to scholars who believe the public should play a limited role in the governance of society, political science itself has, in recent years, witnessed a growth in the number of theorists suggesting that classical democratic ideals be reincorporated into democratic theory. Theorists such as Peter Bachrach, Jack Walker, Carole Pateman, and those whom Dennis Thompson describes as "citizenship theorists" occupy the opposite end of the mass participation continuum since they desire a very active, participatory role on the part of the public. The renewed interest of such scholars in classical democratic ideals, particularly the ideal of citizen participation, leads logically to a concern with the numerical representation of women.

Several theorists, who have advocated a reincorporation of the ideal of participation, have suggested that democratic participation be extended to the workplace and the economic sphere. Although their concern with expanding the realm of democratic participation to include the private
sector may be laudable, these theorists have not examined as thoroughly as they might have the inadequacy of participation within the formal political system.

Some of the best evidence for the failure of the political system to develop active qualities in its citizenry is seen in the data collected on the political orientations and participation of women. Past studies have found women to be somewhat less active than men in some forms of political participation, to have lower levels of political efficacy, and to be less interested in politics. While the male portion of the citizenry has fallen short of fulfilling classical democratic requirements for the ideal citizen, female citizens have fallen even shorter.

From a classical democratic perspective, this passivity of women clearly should be of concern. The greater passivity of women relative to men generally has been explained in terms of sex-role socialization. If women citizens are, in fact, socialized to believe that political interest and activity are not appropriate for females, then from a classical perspective this clearly reflects a failure on the part of a democratic society.

However, the greater passivity of women may result not only from sex-role socialization, but also from the perception that opportunities to affect policy outcomes through participation are not open to women. The inhibiting effects of sex-role socialization may be reinforced by a perception that the political system discourages meaningful participation by women.

There is evidence that American women perceive that they do not have as much opportunity as men to participate in the policy-making aspects of politics. For example, the 1972 Virginia Slims Poll, conducted by Lou Harris and Associates, found 50% of American women agreed with the statement “Women are mostly given the detailed dirty work chores in politics, while men hold the real power.” Only 29% of women disagreed. Furthermore, agreement was highest among those with the remaining years and knowledge necessary to make the greatest contributions to the public sector—those under forty years of age and those with a college education.

One of the factors contributing to the perception that the political system discourages meaningful participation by women is the small numbers of women in visible positions of public leadership. Certainly a woman who overcomes the inhibiting effects of sex-role socialization and desires to participate to her fullest capabilities must be discouraged to some extent by the knowledge that relatively few women have successfully attained positions of political leadership. An increase in the
number of women holding public offices would serve as a visible sign that the system is open to, and encourages, women’s participation.

From a classical democratic perspective, an increase in the numerical representation of women would, of course, be desirable because participation may enhance the self-development of women who attain office. However, the benefits of increased numerical representation may extend well beyond the individual women who gain political positions. By providing a visible indication that the system encourages women’s participation in the policy-making process, greater numerical representation may help to stimulate greater political interest and participation among female citizens.

Theorists associated with the classical democratic perspective have outlined another argument that leads to a concern with the numerical underrepresentation of women among policy-making elites. John Stuart Mill, in his essay “The Subjection of Women,” cited two reasons for an affirmative answer to the question “Would mankind be at all better off if women were free?”

The first benefit Mill foresaw as a consequence of greater equality for women was “the advantage of having the most universal and pervading of all human relations regulated by justice instead of injustice.” The second reason is of greater interest here. As Mill noted,

The second benefit to be expected from giving women the free use of their faculties, by leaving them the free choice of their employments, and opening to them the same field of occupation and the same prizes and encouragements as to other human beings, would be that of doubling the mass of mental faculties available for higher service of humanity.

While Mill was not speaking specifically of advantages that would accrue in the political sphere, his argument clearly is applicable to politics. Kirsten Amundsen has echoed Mill’s argument as it applies to women in contemporary American society:

The effect of sexist ideology has been to disarm the American woman politically and also to deprive American democracy of the potentially informed and intelligent contributions of more than half of its citizenry. From the point of view of classical democratic theory, this is clearly disastrous.

At the governing level, the relative absence of women indicates that the talents of many capable females are not being used to their fullest potential in public service. To scholars who have embraced the classical democratic ideal of maximum citizen participation, numerical representation is important, at least in part, because an increase in women officeholders would represent a greater use of the skills and talents available in society.
Representation of the Interests of Women

The rapid growth of the contemporary feminist movement has called into question the assumption long held by political scientists that women have no policy interests distinct from those of men. During the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, many women organized to push for concerns which had been overlooked in the political process. These concerns commonly are labeled “women’s issues” and throughout this study will be referred to interchangeably as women’s issues and as policy issues dealing with women. For purposes of this research, women’s issues will be defined as those issues where policy consequences are likely to have a more immediate and direct impact on significantly larger numbers of women than of men. This definition encompasses many, although not all, issues of concern to the feminist movement during the 1970s.

Given the emergence of the feminist movement as pluralist proof that many women perceive they have interests distinct from those of men, the question of whether governing institutions have represented these interests adequately becomes important. If the political system, dominated at the elite level by men, has failed to represent the distinctive interests of women, then the question of concern becomes one of how these interests may be better represented.

To examine these questions, the meaning of “representation,” “interests,” and “interests of women on policy issues dealing with women” must be clarified.

Representation as an Intergroup Relationship

Kenneth Prewitt and Heinz Eulau have identified two main currents of contemporary thought regarding representational relationships. The first, or interindividual, conception focuses on the relationship between any single individual, the represented, and a second individual, the representative. Most recent empirical studies have employed this interindividual conception. Yet, as Prewitt and Eulau have noted, such research has not led to a theory that can adequately explain the functioning of contemporary representational government. They have argued:

A viable theory of representation . . . cannot be constructed from individualistic assumptions alone. It must be constructed out of an understanding of representation as a relationship between two collectives—the representative assembly and the represented citizenry.

Prewitt and Eulau, then, view representation as an intergroup relationship between a governing body and the entire community from which its members are selected.
In examining the representation of women’s interests, an intergroup conception of representation will be employed. For it is not the relationship between a single individual, the represented, and the representative that is of interest. Rather, the relationship of interest is that between women as a collectivity and the representative bodies which govern them.

**Interests and Women’s Interests**

Hanna Pitkin has noted that the independence/mandate debate is “undoubtedly the central classic controversy in the literature of political representation.” Any discussion of the quality of representation necessarily involves an examination of this debate over whether a representative should follow the wishes of her/his constituents or be free to act according to her/his own judgment of what is best for their welfare. The independence/mandate controversy is related intrinsically to conceptions of interests. Those in the mandate tradition generally accept the Utilitarian argument that only the individual can determine what is in her/his interest. Those in the independence tradition, on the other hand, maintain that an individual’s interests can be ascertained independent of the sentiments of the individual.

With reference to the mandate conception of interests, Pitkin has claimed: “Among contemporary political scientists, this view is quite common. A man’s interest is equivalent to what the man wants, and the common interest of society is what the members of society want.” What the members of society want generally is ascertained through an examination of public policy preferences or through interest-group activity.

From this perspective, women’s interests can be measured through pressures women exert on government, or through the policy preferences of women. And from this perspective, the evidence indicates that predominantly male governing bodies frequently have failed to act in response to women’s interests on policy issues dealing with women.

The development of several organizations within the feminist movement whose activities include lobbying and other strategies to pressure public officials is one indication that governing institutions often have not acted in response to women’s interests on women’s issues. Public opinion data on the public policy preferences of women provide a second indication. Unfortunately, the assumption that women had no interests distinct from those of men was pervasive throughout society for so long that there is little public opinion data on policy issues dealing with women prior to recent years. Consequently, the examples must be somewhat limited.
When women entered the work force in unprecedented numbers during World War II, an issue that gained public attention was equal pay for equal work. A 1942 Gallup poll showed women to be overwhelmingly in favor of such legislation. When asked, “If women take the place of men in industry, should they be paid the same wages as men?” 85% of females replied affirmatively.26 The results of Gallup polls in 1945 and 1954 also showed large majorities in favor of equal pay.27 Yet, it was not until 1963 that Congress finally passed the Equal Pay Act requiring that women and men receive equal compensation for work performed under equivalent conditions.

Similarly, the Equal Rights Amendment was first introduced into Congress in 1923 and was reintroduced in almost every subsequent legislative session. However, it was not passed by both houses in a single legislative session until 1972. A Gallup Poll taken in October 1974 showed 73% of females in favor of such an amendment.28 Subsequent polls continued to show a plurality of women to favor the ERA.29 Nevertheless, the amendment fell three states short of the thirty-eight necessary for ratification before the June 30, 1982 deadline.

Finally, as early as 1970, a CBS News poll found 78% of women to favor the establishment of day care centers to oversee the children of women who wished to work.30 Yet, a program of quality child care offering services to a large proportion of working women has been provided neither by the federal government nor by state governments.

As these examples illustrate, predominantly male governing bodies frequently have not acted in response to the sentiments of their female constituents on policies dealing with women.31 Neither, it can be argued, have they apparently responded to an objective notion of the interests of women and pursued policies to further the welfare of their female constituents.

In general, American political scientists have rejected the notion of objective, unarticulated interests as inconsistent with a democratic form of government. Implicitly at least, most seem to have accepted the logic of the argument outlined by Jeane Kirkpatrick:

Monarchism, communism, nazism, and dictatorship in the “new” nations have all been justified by some version of the doctrine of false consciousness.... Doctrines that postulate the existence of abstract or objective individual interests deny the individual freedom to choose or to change his identifications. They are incompatible with the premises and practice of democratic government and constitute the epistemological and moral basis of despotism.32
While objective conceptions of interest have sometimes been associated with antidemocratic forms of government, it does not follow that objective conceptions are therefore incompatible with democracy, especially considering the existing evidence on the capabilities of the average citizen. Although pluralists and democratic elitists have rejected classical democratic theory’s emphasis on widespread popular participation, the Utilitarian notion that a citizen is the best judge of her/his own interest has been preserved. Yet, there is a tension between viewing the citizenry as uninformed and uninterested in politics and simultaneously maintaining that individual citizens can best assess their own interests. Like the notion of a participatory citizenry, the supposition that each citizen is the best judge of her/his interest should perhaps be considered an ideal toward which a democratic society should strive.

If the notion that citizens are the best judges of their interests is viewed as an ideal, then one can argue that many citizens, at least under some conditions, may not be the best judges of their own interests. Consequently, perhaps an alternative, less subjective conception of interests should be considered.

In the case of women, there is an additional reason to consider an objective notion of interests. Gerald Berreman has observed that social ascription occurs when individuals are assigned a status on the basis of a characteristic “over which the individual generally has no control, which is determined at birth, which is crucial to social identity, and which vitally affects one’s opportunities, rewards, and social roles.” Kate Millett has explained, “Groups who rule by birthright are fast disappearing, yet there remains one ancient and universal scheme for the domination of one birth group by another—the scheme that prevails in the area of sex.” Like Millett, sociologists generally recognize sex as a basis for social ascription.

Sociologists also have observed that those relegated to an inferior status in society on the basis of social ascription often come to identify with, and to defend, their inferior status. It is through identity formation in the process of socialization that social ascription is effectively maintained. Women have been so thoroughly socialized to accept their inferior status that the result has been what Sandra Bem and Daryl Bem have termed a nonconscious ideology, a set of beliefs which . . . a person accepts implicitly but which remain outside his awareness because alternative conceptions of the world remain unimagined. . . . In our view, there is no ideology which better exemplifies these points than the beliefs and attitudes which most Americans hold about women. Not only do most .
in our society hold hidden prejudices about women’s “natural” role, but these nonconscious beliefs motivate a host of subtle practices that are dramatically effective at keeping her “in her place.”

Because of the tendency for those assigned an inferior status through social ascription to accept and to identify with their inferior status, it may be difficult for women to judge subjectively what is in their interests. Dominant socialization processes would lead women to prefer inequality. For this reason, some scholars, even those who generally view opinions as valid measures of interests, might find a more objective notion of women’s interests preferable to a purely subjective one.

Numerous attempts have been made to move away from the definition of interests as equivalent to policy preferences by defining interests more objectively. It is not my intention to become embroiled in the dispute over which conception best defines “real” interests. Scholars who have attempted to define interests objectively generally have wanted to derive a general conceptualization that would apply to the interests of all individuals in all societies. My goal is a far less ambitious one: to specify the elements essential to an objective determination of the interests of women in American society on policy issues dealing with women.

Because social ascription limits both life’s opportunities and life’s rewards for women, it seems that there are at least two elements crucial to an objective determination of their distinctive interests: (1) a broadening of the range of choices or options available to females, and (2) the removal of ascriptive criteria in the allocation of rewards.

When the interests of women on policy issues dealing with women are defined objectively to include these two elements, they coincide roughly, although perhaps not perfectly, with most of the issue positions of the feminist movement. For example, passage of the ERA would both broaden the range of opportunities available to women and remove ascriptive criteria in the allocation of rights, responsibilities, and benefits. Legalized abortion provides greater choice for women either to bear or not to bear children. Provision of child care facilities would broaden opportunities by making the option of employment outside the home available to more women.

Moreover, when the interests of women on policy issues dealing with women are defined objectively, it is clear that governing bodies have not always acted in the interests of women on these issues. For example, there are still states where the husband has the right to manage and control marital property, even if the wife has purchased the property with
her earnings, indicating that women and men are not equally entitled to the material benefits of a marital partnership. A comprehensive program of child care has never been instituted, thus denying many women the option to work for wages. Social security benefits for homemakers, except as a result of their status as wives, are not available, indicating that labor in the home is not rewarded equally with labor outside the home.

Thus, whether one prefers a subjective or an objective definition of interests, one arrives at the same conclusion: Women’s interests on policy issues dealing with women have not been adequately represented by governing bodies.\textsuperscript{40} In terms of the independence/mandate controversy, representatives have not acted in response to the majority sentiments of their female constituency on issues dealing with women. Nor, apparently, have they acted in accordance with an objective notion of the interests of women, as defined above, and pursued policies that would further the welfare of their female constituents.

\textit{Increasing the Representation of Women’s Interests}

How can more adequate representation of the interests of women on policy issues dealing with women be attained? In addition to the use of unconventional tactics such as demonstrations and boycotts, at least three conventional strategies to achieve greater representation of women’s interests have been evident in the women’s rights movement. The first is the use of lobbying tactics to attempt to influence representatives. It is difficult to assess the effectiveness of this strategy as employed by feminist organizations, just as it is difficult to assess the impact of any lobbying effort.\textsuperscript{41} There is some evidence, however, that lobbying by women’s organizations has had an impact on at least some issues.\textsuperscript{42}

The second strategy focuses on organizing women to vote for representatives who will better represent women’s interests. Given the influence of party identification and candidate image on voting decisions and the diversity among women, this is likely to be difficult. However, the appearance of the “gender gap” in voting in the 1980 and 1982 elections has led organizations within the women’s movement to devote increased energy to mobilizing women to vote for candidates who will better represent them.\textsuperscript{43} Future elections should help to determine whether such a strategy can be effective.

The third strategy, involving an effort to elect women to political office to represent the interests of women, is the strategy of interest in this study. This approach assumes that as more females attain political offices, they will represent the interests of women on women’s issues more adequately than men have. A number of scholars have suggested that there is
likely to be a relationship between the number of political positions filled by members of a group, particularly if the group is politically organized and socially conscious, and the extent to which the group’s interests are recognized and acted on in the policy process.44 If these scholars are correct, then an increase in the number of women holding elective offices should lead to greater representation of the interests of women on policy issues dealing with women. However, whether greater numerical representation of women will, in fact, lead to greater representation of the interests of women remains an empirical question that can only be answered through research.