



Why are gender differences in the Swedish parliament diminishing?

Inter-parliamentary and extra-parliamentary causes

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Abstract

During last decades, gender differences in representative bodies have diminished in a variety of areas, descriptively but also substantially. For example, in Sweden, social issues are still a typical female issue among older representatives, although this is no longer the case among younger representatives. A similar trend can be noticed internationally, although Sweden appears to be at the forefront, which defends choosing the case. The project aims at explaining these diminishing substantial gender differences among parliamentarians, thereby paying attention both to intra-parliamentarian and extra-parliamentarian causes. With intra-parliamentarian causes we refer to party strategies, professionalization of parties and the cyclical life of policy issues. With extra-parliamentarian causes we refer to changing living patterns including changing models for care-services (New Public Management), which might have led to a stronger involvement of men in care responsibilities. If causal factors interact, which is probable, the project will strive to show more in detail how this interaction proceeds. We will use available data from SNES (Riksdags Surveys) and collect original data from longer interviews with parliamentarians.

The problem and aim of the project

Research on the representation of gender has been dominated by the problem of what determines the numerical share of women in representative bodies, as well as the question on whether or not these women make a political difference (Beckwith, 2007; Celis, Childs, Kantola and Krook, 2008; Dahlerup, 2006; Grey, 2006; Kittilson, 2006; Mackay, 2004; Lovenduski and Norris 2003; Norris, 1996; Wängnerud, 2000; 2009). In short, empirical research has generally concluded that women in parliament express more concern for social and family issues, i.e., “care-and-career policies” than men and that women more often think of themselves as representative of women and being in close contact with women’s grassroots organizations (Lovenduski

and Norris, 1993; Inglehart and Norris, 2003). Recent empirical developments, however, suggest that substantial changes in what women and men represent are currently happening, more precisely, we see that substantial differences between women and men are diminishing. This process has hardly been examined in research, but it opens the field to issues of whether gender equality gives rise to new orientations among both women and men, for example with increased attention to issues of care (Engster and Stensöta, 2011; Stensöta 2004; Williams, 2000; Young, 2000).

Diminishing substantial gender differences among politicians can be seen in a variety of areas. In Sweden, for, which has had a longer history of larger women representation, a clear trend toward diminishing

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gender differences between women and men can be seen in over a period of twenty years (1985–2006). There is almost complete gender equality in the proportion of women and men on Riksdag committees since about a decade. Further, there are diminishing gender differences of the representative mandate captured, for example, as the percentage of women and men MPs who say it is crucial to promote women's interests and concerns. Last but not least we see diminishing gender differences between the top ten issues that women and men MPs say are their main political priorities in open-ended answers (Riksdag Surveys); the ranking correlations have increased from 0.42 in 1985 to 0.74 in 2006. This trend is seen across parties, although it is stronger among the left and green representatives (Wängnerud, 2010). Traces of the trend can be found internationally, which is mirrored by the increased critique on a definition of "women's issues" and the expressed need to update research on this area (Tronto, 1996; Young, 2000).

The project *Why are gender differences in the Swedish parliament diminishing? Inter-political and extra-political causes* aims to explain these diminishing differences. The project is lead by Helena Stensöta and also includes Lena Wängnerud. The aim of the project is to determine whether the change is mainly attributable to factors within parliament, here called inter-political forces, or whether they are mainly attributable to factors outside parliament, here called extra-political forces. In the likely case that explanatory factors are interrelated the project will describe how processes interact to produce the empirical phenomena of diminishing substantial gender differences. At large, the project is situated in research on substantive representation, which focuses primarily on the content of representation rather than on the numerical issue, as research on descriptive representation does.

The Swedish case is an optimal case for examining the process of diminishing gender

differences. Sweden is generally regarded as being at the front line of establishing gender equality both in terms of political efforts and outcomes, as its high rankings on indices such as the Gender Empowerment Index and Gender Development Index (GEM and GDI, respectively; Human Development Reports) clearly indicate. Thus, one could argue that by examining Sweden and gender equality, we might get a "glimpse ahead" of more general processes. Sweden is further well chosen for discussing especially decreasing differences between women and men priorities and preferences as Swedish gender policy generally is characterized as an "equality route" aiming at shared responsibilities of women and men both at work and at home (Florin, 1998; Lindvert, 2006). Sweden is further generally regarded as a country where the processes of party professionalization have proceeded far (Hagevi and Jahn, 1999). Last, in regard of more formal equality tools such as quotas, Sweden lies far ahead through the voluntary assignment of most parties to this strategy since the beginning of the 1990s (Freidenvall, 2006).

Two broad hypotheses are examined, interpolitical and extrapolitical causes behind diminishing gender differences. The hypothesis of *inter-political* causes is in turn derived from two strands of research; party-theory, which predicts a professionalization of parties, involving increasing similarities between parliamentarians accompanied by an expanding cleavage towards the general population (Katz and Mair, 2009). From feminist theory, we derive the idea that conscious equality measures such as quotas can be one important cause behind diminishing gender differences (Dahlerup, 2006; Freidenvall, 2006). In previous research interpolitical factors have been discussed on a general level in the previous work of Wängnerud (2010), but no more thorough studies on the problem has been performed. The hypothesis of *extra-political* causes is derived from more structural oriented feminist theory where changing

living patterns in regard of care responsibility are seen as transforming forces in society (Hernes, 1987; Rosenbluth, Salmon and Thies, 2006; Stensöta, 2004). Because living patterns of men and women are becoming more similar in regard of combining work-and-family responsibilities in the private sphere, and because of an increasing share of men in welfare state entrepreneurship, a trend of diminishing differences can be predicted. This idea is widespread in feminist theory generally, however existing theories lack in theoretical precision on how these processes of change take place more precisely, as well as empirical assessment of these more precise theoretical ideas.

Empirically, we will use several data-sources. First, we will use available time series data from the Riksdag Survey where attitudes of parliamentarians have been collected during over twenty-five years (1985-2010). The last wave will be freshly available to us in the beginning of the project as Lena Wängnerud is the head investigator of this wave. The total dataset will further be expanded by contextual data in order to test some of the hypotheses. Second, we will collect data from about 20-25 longer interviews with strategically chosen parliamentarians to elaborate on the causal mechanisms involved. Third, we will collect information about actual initiatives of women and men in parliament in the form of private member bills. This last study touches upon the question on whether diminishing differences are seen also when actual policy is made, that is as real substantial differences. This last study will more have the character of a pilot-study as the main focus of the project is the focus on already identified diminishing substantial differences between women and men in parliament.

The study is relevant from both political and theoretical perspectives. *Politically*, if the diminishing gender differences have mainly inter-political causes, they could be a sign of a widening gap between MPs and voters, which forms a democratic problem

(Katz and Mair, 2009). If, on the other hand, the reasons for the diminishing gender differences are mainly found within extra-political causes, they could be seen as an effect of a more equal society (Phillips, 1994; Young, 2000). *Theoretically*, the project contributes to party-theory, especially ideas on professionalization of parties, which has not yet been examined from a gender perspective. To theories on gender representation, we contribute by focusing on a new and relevant empirical problem – diminishing gender differences in substantive representation – as discussed in the introduction.

Previous research

The research field on women representation can be divided into two broad strands: One is focusing on descriptive representation, i.e. the numerical distribution of seats between women and men in representative bodies on different levels as well as the reasons behind variations of representation of the sexes. The other strand is focusing on substantive representation, that is, the difference that a more equal share of women make substantially, as well as what conditions enable/constrain them/us to exert such impact (Beckwith, 2007; Kittilson, 2006; Lovenduski, 2005; Mackay, 2004; Skjeje, 1992; Thomas, 1994; Wängnerud, 2009).

The field of descriptive representation has the longest history. Previous research has shown that numerical representation of women is favored by factors at the system level, such as; proportional representation (Lovenduski and Norris, 2003); mechanisms of policy diffusion as when one party increases women's representation, other are likely to follow (Norris, 1996) and the importance of "equality cultures" (Pfau-Effinger, 1998; Inglehart and Norris, 2003). Differences between parties can also be found, the representation of women tends to be higher within left parties (Kittilson, 2006) and quotas are effective tools (Freidenvall

2006; Kittelson, 2006; Dahlerup 2006). Newer research in the field emphasizes also actors and their strategies (Wängnerud 2000; Childs and Krook 2006).

The field of substantial representation has been described as a generally less mature but quickly growing field (Wängnerud, 2009). The basis issue is the difference that women make in politics, but it is a contested issue in regard of what women are expected to represent and how such a definition should be grounded. In practice, however, rather similar lists of “women issues” (Fox and Oaxley, 2003) are applied. Empirical research has generally concluded that women in parliaments express more concern for social and family issues, i.e., “care-and-career policies,” (Skjeie, 1992) than men and further that women more often think of themselves as representative of women and cultivate close contact with women’s grassroots organizations (Beckwith, 2007; Chaney, 2002; Childs and Krook 2006; Franceschet and Piscopo 2008; Mackay, 2006; Norris and Lovenduski, 2003; Wängnerud, 2000).

Theoretically, a definition of “women’s issues” has been regarded as problematic because of its inherent essentialism (Jonasdottir, 1994; Stensöta, 2004) Moreover, at least since the beginning of the 1990s the “difference-turn” in feminism has problematized that women share some experiences, but also are divided along several other experiences such as socio-economic conditions, ethnicity, motherhood et cetera (Young, 1996; Dietz, 2003; Diaz, 2005). Additionally, women have now entered almost all policy areas, which also complicates the picture.

The trend of diminishing gender differences has only been focused indirectly in previous research. For example, the issue of whether, and if so how, men are affected by increasing women representation has been touched upon but framed in this way, the problem is limited to how women exert influence men and leave out external factors that might influence men’s behavior

independently, such as an increasing involvement in care-oriented tasks. Another approach is ideas on cyclical mechanisms of policy, which suggests that the significance of politicians’ gender peaks in the innovation phase of a policy, because actors feel a pressure to polarize to other actors from strategic considerations (Bratton and Ray, 2002).

In regard of independent factors behind the exertion of substantial representation, a number of suggestions are found in previous literature. A considerable part of the literature focuses on hindrances to female politicians to exert substantial influence such as the well-used hypothesis of a “critical mass” of about 20–30 percent being necessary in order for women to affect influence, before which they are mostly “tokens” of existing institutions and common behavior (Kanter, 1977; Dahlerup 2006; Childs and Krook 2006). When substantial representation is focused more positively, research increasingly uses actor-oriented approaches focusing on strategies (Franceschet and Piscopo 2008; Childs and Withey 2004). Further, Beckwith, (2007) points at the importance of both numbers and “newness” for the possibilities to exert influence. Grey (2006) points at the importance of institutional position of women as well as the number of years in office. It has also been shown that is important to exert influence, a research relating to studies on social movements (Banaszak, Beckwith and Rucht, 2003).

More explicit extra-political causes behind differences in substantive representation are also discussed in previous literature, for example through the general idea that gender differences arise from structurally different experiences of responsibilities for care for children in the family as well as the private/public divide, which both are fundamental to feminism (Jonasdottir, 1994; Pateman, 1989; Tronto, 1994). Such hypotheses are sometimes understood as cultural explanations (Inglehart and Norris, 2003) and sometimes discussed in a more policy oriented way (Engster & Stensöta, 2011; Hernes, 1987). A deficit

in this previous literature is that the hypotheses most often describe broad processes and that theoretical precision of the actual mechanisms involved are lacking which can lead to tautology (Rosenbluth, Salmon and Thies, 2006; Stensöta, 2004).

In relation to the general field of party studies, the field of women's representation is still a rather separate field. One proposition in party theory is that, over time, parties turn into more professionalized organizations as they develop from mass parties, through catchall parties, and finally into cartel parties (Katz and Mair, 1997). This development is seen as triggered by increased competition between parties (Borchert and Zeiss, 2003) and also entails a new role for parties from representing organized interests (Duverger, 1954) to becoming increasingly professionalized. If we assume that parties consist of various parts; the party-on-the-ground; the party in the central office; and sometimes also the party in public office (Katz and Mair, 2002) this development can have democratic consequences. According to the theory of cartel parties, the declining importance of the grassroots lead to increasing importance of the party itself and of the party caucus (Hagevi and Jahn, 1999). This general hypothesis of a professionalization of parties, involving a separation between parliamentarians and ordinary people, has not yet been examined from a gender perspective (Katz and Mair, 2009). To test this idea on the field of gender representation would also serve to bring these to subfields of research closer to one another.

The project, data and method

The project will primarily use three data sources, two of which will consist of original data collected within the project.

First, we will use data from Swedish National Election Study Program (SNES), the Riksdag Surveys. They have been conducted eight times, in 1969, 1985, 1988, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2006, and 2010; the last and eighth

wave, of which Lena Wängnerud is the principal investigator, will be made available to us in the spring of 2011. The questions cover a broad range of priorities, interests, and views on political issues as well as background data on sex, age and party affiliation. This data set will be supplemented by contextual background register data, which let us examine the strength of external political factors on individual preferences of MPs. If possible we will also derive data on care-responsibilities at home from individual MPs.

Second, the project will collect original data in the form of longer interviews that explore the underlying mechanisms behind change in a more explorative way, as this method will let us grasp the reasoning of individual MPs regarding priorities and strategies. This data will also have a reference point in the past, as Lena Wängnerud collected original data from longer interviews with MPs as part of her dissertation in the mid 1990s. We will choose interviewees strategically and interview about 20 to 30 persons in total.

Third, as the focus of the project is the diminishing gender difference on substantial representation, it is also interesting to explore the impact of these diminishing differences on actual political output. We will therefore collect data on governmental bills including private members bills from a selection of the years that the SNES Riksdags survey has been conducted, and distinguish women-women collaborations, men-men collaborations and women-men collaborations as well as the content of the bill. As the focus of the project is to explain diminishing differences that already are identified, this part of the project will rather have the form of a pilot-study that explores the ground for future research.

In addition, we will collect information about changing official internal party strategies, such as amendment of the label "feminist", but also other internal strategic party-decisions on internal concordance et cetera to examine hypotheses related to inter-parliamentary causes.

Hypotheses

Drawing from a broad range of theories related to developments both inside and outside the political system, a set of hypotheses has been developed. Schematically, the project proposes two divergent hypotheses as to why gender differences in parliament are diminishing, each including several sub-hypotheses. Notably, there are two empirical trends that we wish to explain: the general diminishing gender differences that can be seen in several arenas in parliament, and the increased involvement of men in social issues. The hypotheses are:

1. *Inter-political causes*: a) Feminist commitment of parties, b) Increased professionalization of parties, c) The cyclical life of political issues
2. *Extra-political causes related to gender*: a) Changing living patterns of women and men related to family care responsibilities, b) Increasing professional involvement of men in welfare-state-related entrepreneurship.

Below, the hypotheses are described more in detail, which material will be used to examine them as well as the criteria for conclusion. A concluding section discusses how different theoretical propositions can be distinguished from one another.

1. INTER-POLITICAL FORCES

a) Feminist engagement of parties

A feminist engagement of parties can be one reason for more men to engage in previously typical “women-issues” as well as for women to engage in opposite fields. For example, the committee assignments to women and men can partly be influenced by strategic choices of parties. Wängnerud (1998) has, for example, attributed the diminishing gender differences in committee assignments to changing party strategies as a reaction to the Party Support-Stockings (in Swedish *Stödstrumporna*), in the early 1990s. Although Sweden now has a feminist party, Feminist Initiative

(Feministiskt Initiativ), we do not know if there is a similar threat that makes parties feel obliged to act that has influenced more recent developments.

We will systematically collect information on formal party-internal strategies in relation to gender equality ambitions during the examined period (1985–2012) and we will use the longer interviews to explore informal strategies. For a change to be interpreted as an effect of strategic thinking within parties, we need to detect explicit references to such strategic thinking on the area of gender, such as explicit statements from party headquarters, and/or individual MPs.

b) Increased professionalization of parties

In a professionalized party setting, we would expect the caucuses of parties to exercise increasing control over all issues and not only gender related issues, for example on which issues are put on the political agenda, in which form, and at what time. Hence, the professionalization of parties arguably involves general diminishing room for individual MPs to have divergent preferences and views.

We will systematically collect information on general internal party strategies. A key indication of support for this hypothesis would be if we found diminishing differences between the priorities of women and men MPs in all areas of politics, not just in relation to gender-related issues, can be found. If the process of professionalization were a socializing process, we would further expect to find cohort differences, where younger MPs are more affected.

c) The cyclical life of policy issues

This third sub hypothesis points at gender differences as strategic choices for a “new” group in parliament as a vehicle for defending their presence and exercise influence. When an issue is no longer considered new, or the related problems have more or less been solved, the special identification of the

particular group with the particular issue will fade away.

We will partly rely on explicit references from individual MPs that we interview, and how they describe their engagement. It might also be possible to trace such a cycle in separate parties, as women have entered later into right oriented parties. If we detect a gender polarization within each party related to women becoming a critical mass within this party.

2. EXTRA-POLITICAL CAUSES:

a) *Changing living patterns of gender*

This sub hypothesis refers to changes in living patterns of gender in the private sphere. The hypothesis states that involvement in care-responsibilities in the private sphere, gives rise to more care-oriented attitudes and behaviors, both by women and men, and as living patterns in relation to care-and-career have become increasingly similar, this can account for diminishing differences between women and men MPs. (Stensöta, 2004). This hypothesis is especially interesting in relation to men's changing priorities in politics.

We will examine this hypothesis on contextual level, treating the experiences on care-responsibilities as an experience attached to the local community. We will collect data on "equality" with the constituencies of the MPs. Data are available through the Statistics Sweden (SCB) and Swedish Social Insurance Agency (SSIA). There is also an expectation of cohort differences inherent in the hypothesis, that younger men are more care-oriented. We might be able to retrieve information about whether MPs have children at home, especially for the last Riksdags survey, but this might be difficult for previous waves. It might also be the case that MPs generally are living more gender equal than people in general, which can be examined on a general level.

b) *Changing involvement of men in welfare state-related entrepreneurship*

During last decades new public management forms has been introduced into welfare state services (Pollit and Bouckhart, 2004). According to the proposition of Helga Maria Hernes (1987), women's involvement in social policy had its roots in women's work in the public sector (Rosenbluth, Salmon and Thies, 2006). If men are increasingly involved in such work, this might be the cause of their changed interest in this area. This hypothesis draws on changes in men's living patterns, as the previous, but in relation to the professional sphere.

As in the previous hypothesis, we examine the hypothesis on the contextual level, deciding whether MPs constituencies can explain the diminishing gender differences.

HOW DISTINGUISH THE THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS EMPIRICALLY?

The empirical indications described above are not mutually exclusive, but rather likely to interact in which case the project aims to elaborate more precisely on how the described processes interact to produce the empirical phenomena of diminishing substantial gender differences. How we will distinguish this interaction empirically will be elaborated more in detail in course of the analysis, but we can already now point at some possible problems and how they can be handled.

Several of the hypotheses include expectations of cohort differences. We expect professionalization to affect diminishing gender differences among younger MPs, but we also expect this group to have more similar living experiences of personal care-responsibilities. The idea to operationalize the impact of living experiences through the contextual level of constituencies is one way to distinguish these hypotheses from each other. In the same sense, the two external hypotheses can be difficult to disentangle. It can well be the case that the same constituencies are in the forefront both in regard of equality in personal

living experiences and in regard of professional living experiences. If the longer interviews do not let us distinguish between the two, we will probably choose to discuss the mechanisms in an interconnected way and choose other types of methods to distinguish them in a future project. In general, the longer interviews serve to highlight mechanisms. All hypotheses can be supported through the interviews through manifest statements of strategic thinking within parties or through manifest motivations for why specific priorities or solutions are chosen.

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