



## *Testing the politics of presence*

### *A comparative study on the importance of gender, class, and ethnicity in the Swedish parliament*

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Anne Phillips's book "The Politics of Presence" was published in 1995. The impact on research and public debate was immediate and strong. This theory posits that women politicians are best equipped to represent women's interests. From its basis in sociology, what the theory actually says is that everyday life experiences are significant to the formation of political views and behaviours. And it is because women politicians, to a greater extent than male politicians, share life experiences with women voters that they are presumed to be better representatives of women's interests.

The theory of the politics of presence has gained reasonable support in more recent empirical research (Bratton & Ray 2002; Diaz 2005; Lovenduski & Norris 2003; Schwindt-Bayer & Mishler 2005; Thomas 1994; Wängnerud 2000, 2009). There are studies which show that the political views and priorities of women representatives are closely aligned with those of women voters. Typical examples are that women award higher priority to gender equality and social/family policy than men do. This does not mean that women, across all party lines, advocate the same types of solutions; the common denominator is that women politicians put particular problem areas on the agenda. Hege Skjeie, who was early to perform empirical analyses of the significance of gender to the parliamentary process, uses the term "care and career politics" for the areas on which women politicians put particular emphasis. Skjeie's (1992) studies of the Norwegian Storting show that when the proportion of women MPs rises,

questions pertaining to how people can successfully combine work and family become more central.

The description above, that the theory of the politics of presence says that women politicians are best equipped to represent women's interests, is a simplification. But the basis of the theory is a belief that shared life experiences are a mechanism that will lead to changes of the political agenda and by extension the conditions of people's everyday lives. Phillips describes gender parity among policymakers as essential if women's interests are to be adequately addressed; there "must" be equality among those elected to office:

There are particular needs, interests, and concerns that arise from women's experience, and these will be inadequately addressed in a politics that is dominated by men. Equal rights to a vote have not proved strong enough to deal with this problem; there must also be equality among those elected to office. (Phillips 1995, 66)

However, Phillips writes nowhere that women politicians must be feminists or otherwise see themselves as the particular representatives of women; the idea is rather that if more people (women) come into the political assemblies who share the life experiences of women voters, it will affect which issues are addressed in policy. Whether or not representatives themselves think about their actions in this way, they act upon social experiences and not only on ideological standpoints. The mechanism is to be likened to an invisible hand.

One of the most interesting challenges to the theory of the politics of presence is

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formulated by Iris Marion Young in her book "Inclusion and Democracy" (2000). This alternative approach may be called the theory of the politics of awareness. The central idea in Young's book is that politicians need to consciously relate to a particular group's social experience in order to represent that group's interests. This theory does not rely on women politicians per se, but rather on politicians with a change-oriented agenda. The following quotation shows how Young formulates this alternative point of view. The emphasis in the citation is on giving a voice to and expressing certain experiences:

First, I feel represented when someone is looking after the interests I take as mine and share with some others. Secondly, it is important to me that the principles, values and priorities that I think should guide political decisions are voiced in discussion. Finally, I feel represented when at least some of those discussing and voting on policies understand and express the kind of social experience I have because of my social group position and the history of social group relations. (Young 2000, 134)

The theory of the politics of presence and the theory of the politics of awareness should probably not be regarded as competing theories. Instead, what I want to bring to the fore is that the theory of the politics of presence needs to be developed. Empirical research shows that not all women politicians promote gender equality or particularly represent the situations of women citizens. Obviously, some male politicians are also active in these areas.

The focus of this project is on the tension between the theory of the politics of presence, emphasizing background characteristics, and the theory of the politics of awareness, emphasizing explicit recognition of group experiences. The core idea is that useful insights could be gained from a comparison of gender, class, and ethnicity. Anne Phillips (1995) herself discusses all three categories but is rather vague when it comes to class and ethnicity. For instance, she argues that ethnicity is an even more heterogeneous

category than gender and that the party-structure in most liberal democracies is built on class cleavages. However, there are few empirical studies that simultaneously try to measure the importance of gender, class, and ethnicity in the parliamentary process. The answer could be that, yes, gender is a special category; but the answer could also be that the mechanisms at work are quite similar across several different categories.

The questions triggered by the preceding discussion are multilayered. The question is not only which politicians are best equipped to represent the interests of certain groups; intense discussion is ongoing in international research on the conditions that would enable "new" groups to have particular impact in parliamentary processes. From a feminist perspective Joni Lovenduski (2005, 48-52) discusses a culture of masculinity, deeply embedded in political institutions, as an obstacle faced by women politicians. This culture is manifest in things like which employees are hired at the parliament, but also in the unspoken rules governing how politics will be run. Other scholars, such as Karen Beckwith (2007), emphasize that there are more women among newly elected representatives and that this ratio affects what kind of impact they can have. As a rule, it takes a certain amount of time for representatives to attain the most influential posts in a parliament. Discussions in feminist-oriented research also deal with the dynamic that may arise when women politicians influence their male colleagues. Skjeie (1992) has described the occurrence of a spill over effect in the Norwegian Storting: the high number of women elected has also helped bring greater attention to women's situations among male representatives.

Thus, research in this field needs to be sensitive to power-relations and seek after interactions between back-ground characteristics such as gender, class, and ethnicity and other characteristics, such as seniority, that might influence the pre-conditions for individual politicians in their parliamentary work. More



specifically, this project will address three related but slightly different research themes:

[1] Who gets elected to the Swedish Parliament? This question implies a comparison of dimensions such as party-affiliation, age, and previous political experience, across gender, class, and ethnicity. The research question is if there is a “double-burden” facing certain groups; that is, as “young newcomers belonging to a party in opposition” and woman/working-class/from a minority group.

[2] Who has power in the Swedish Parliament? This question implies a comparison of the distribution of powerful positions across gender, class, and ethnicity. The focus will be on internal arenas, such as the standing committees in the parliament, but the research question is not only about formal positions; also self-perceived experiences of power and informal possibilities for influencing the parliamentary process will be highlighted.

[3] Who is transforming the political agenda in the Swedish Parliament? This question implies a comparison of political priorities, political standpoints, and the promotion of certain policies across gender, class, and ethnicity. What is particularly under-researched in previous work on parliaments is the importance of certain background characteristics in relation to the content of the parliamentary process. We know more about the other two themes presented above. And yet, this is what the theory of the politics of presence is all about. Phillips (1995, 47) state that “It is...representation with a purpose; it aims to subvert or add or transform.”

### **Arguments for a case-study on the parliamentary process in Sweden**

Intersectionality is something of a buzz-word in contemporary debates on political representation. Most researchers recognize the importance of background characteristics such as gender, class, and ethnicity; however few are able to do in-depth studies taking into account more than one category at a

time. The advantage with studying the parliamentary process in Sweden is to a large extent pragmatic; here we have a unique set of parliamentary questionnaires, making it possible to shed light on all research themes presented above.

Parliamentary questionnaires have been conducted in 1969, 1985, 1988, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2002, 2006, and 2010 (response rates ~90%). The parliamentary questionnaires are conducted in ways that makes it possible to compare the political views and priorities among parliamentarians with those among voters (the Swedish National Election Study Program). Important to note is that an Internet-based survey will be conducted among all candidates in the 2010 national election in Sweden which enables far-reaching investigations into the theme “Who gets elected.”

One possible disadvantage with studying Sweden is that the ideological left-right dimension is strong and that party-discipline is almost taken for granted when it comes to voting in the parliament. However, one could argue that this makes the Swedish case even more interesting. If background characteristics such as gender, class, and ethnicity are able to make an imprint here, then the theory of the politics of presence has gained reasonably strong support. Besides, previous research has shown that gender is an important category in the parliamentary process in Sweden – key here is to use indicators that capture impacts in earlier stages of the parliamentary process than the final vote in the chamber.

What also needs to be discussed in connection to the choice to study Sweden is the long period with a comparatively high number of women elected. Already in the 1980's the proportion of women in the Swedish parliament corresponded to what is commonly defined as a “critical mass.” The concept of a critical mass implies that there is a threshold number or a “tipping point” at which the impact of a certain group, like women, becomes apparent in an institution like the parliament; a figure of ~30% is often



mentioned. Added to this picture should be that recent studies show that the effect of gender is not constant over time; in the Swedish parliament gender differences was most obvious in the 1980's and 1990's (Wängnerud 2010). However, the only solution here is to pay attention to potential thresholds and possible changes over time when drawing conclusions. In a similar vein, I also need to pay attention to contextual factors such as the party-composition in the parliament. In 2010 an anti-immigrant party, the Swedish Democrats, gained seats in the Swedish parliament. This is a new situation which might influence the mechanisms at work, especially in relation to ethnicity but arguably also for other dimensions. The Swedish Democratic Party is heavily male-dominated.

### **A note on methodology**

It goes without saying that parliaments are complex institutions and that it is a methodological challenge to empirically test theories like the politics of presence and the politics of awareness. One suggestion is that studies in this field ought to be longitudinal in design; we should follow what happens “from the start” when representatives from a certain group are few, up to the point when they are present in large numbers (Beckwith 2007). Longitudinal designs of this kind are hard to conduct. An alternative is to use a wide range of indicators in cross-section analysis and include control variables in order to isolate effects of the selected background characteristics.

For the Parliamentary Study 2010 (Riksdagsenkät 2010) I was able to craft questions that enable comparisons across gender, class, and ethnicity in new ways. We have included measurements on the representatives' view of their task like whether it is important to them, personally, to represent the interests of women, workers and/or immigrants (this is an important indicator for the politics of awareness perspective). The questionnaire

also includes a large number of items concerning political priorities, political standpoints, and policy promotion. Furthermore, we emphasize working-conditions and power-relations within the parliament. We have also included a set of questions making it possible to capture representatives “objective” social background (this is an important indicator for the politics of presence perspective). Some of the background characteristics will also be measured through the official information available from the Swedish parliament.

The question of methodology also concern whether it is at all reasonable to focus the political agenda at the elite level of society, when trying to test theories of representation that deal with rather far-reaching transformations. I see this project as an early step in a larger research agenda where, in the long run, the ambition is to capture also transformations regarding actual conditions in the everyday lives of citizens. So far, what I have at hand is the possibility to compare voters and elected representatives across gender, class, and ethnicity, through a number of surveys that, in international comparison, are of outstanding high quality.

I am fully aware of that, even with the restrictions mentioned above, this is an ambitious project. My background is as a specialist studying the importance of gender in the parliamentary process in Sweden. This means that I have generated experience on how to do analyses on categories that are (sometimes) cross-cutting the established party-system. I am also aware of that scholars of intersectionality argue that social structures of gender, class, and ethnicity mutually modify one another and that relationships among these categories can be studied in a number of different ways (Weldon 2006). A qualitative approach is sometimes necessary in order to understand the complexities at work. However, the way I want to push this field forward is through theoretically fine-tuned understandings in combination with

methodological tools firmly established in well-recognized studies on representative democracy (cf. Esaiasson & Heidar 2000).

One part of the process towards fine-tuned understandings is the theoretical reasoning on the concept of “interests”. The debate on what constitutes “women’s interests” is, for example, intense within feminist-oriented research. Contemporary debates concern features of elitism in gender research – that is, a tendency to ascribe interests to women in a top-down fashion – and also features of essentialism: the tendency to view women and men as fixed, rather than changeable, categories. Debates also concern – as previously touched upon – how gender is related to categories such as ethnicity, age, and class (Dietz 2003).

I have no clear answer to the question of the precise definitions that will be used in this project; however, what should be noted is the notion from Hanna Pitkin (1967) that the concept of interests is “ubiquitous” in debates on representation. To differentiate interests is a matter of concretizing that which various groups can expect to gain through political inclusion. Even though the definitions used will end up a bit simplified, I judge this as a risk worth taking. Gender, class, and ethnicity are categories that can serve as a lens that makes important issues in the field of representation visible: Whom do elected politicians represent? What is at stake in the parliamentary process? What do we know about the interplay between parliaments and the everyday lives of citizens? I hope that this project can add new fuel to all these classic debates.

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