

Gender and Political Representation

Session 10: Role Models

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What we did in the last session...

- we introduced the concept of 'feminist institutionalism'
- your peers presented evidence on how gender quotas and substantive representation augment women's substantive representation
- through the main reading, we learned that direct democracy has a positive effect on women's political participation (e.g., turnout)

Plan for today

1. We are discussing evidence on how role models shape women's political representation.
2. This is the second last substantive session: we will discuss more general ideas relating to your term paper
 - what (good) research questions are
 - what a good argument is composed of

Angela Merkel alone among world leaders



Figure: Picture taken at the G7 summit in Japan 2016 ([Source: Wikimedia](#))

In relation to this session, what could this picture tell us?

The idea of critical mass

- simple idea: more women in politics, tipping points may be reached, leading to substantive improvement in descriptive and substantive representation
- if women are part of highly skewed groups (under-represented), they serve as tokens who cannot alter ongoing group dynamics but instead heighten the relevance of group membership
- if women (and other marginalized groups) reach a critical mass, they can forge intra-group coalitions and bolster groups' interests (Kanter 1977)

The idea of critical mass

- there is, however, criticism on this numerical approach to tackle gender inequalities
 - inclusion of minorities, beyond a certain threshold, could also lead to a backlash by the majority (Yoder 1991)

Evidence on the critical mass

Table 2

Applied to mentoring program (1 = yes, 0 = no); “could see myself running for office in a few years” (0–4 scale); 95% confidence intervals in brackets; generalized difference estimator for ITT (Aronow and Middleton, 2013)

	Applied to mentoring program	Political ambition
	ITT	
Control mean	0.02	0.35
Effect of invitation	−0.01	−0.16
	[−0.03, 0.01]	[−0.37, 0.06]
Covariate-adjusted	−0.01	−0.13
	[−0.03, 0.01]	[−0.29, 0.03]
Blocks	Yes	Yes
<i>N</i>	612	450

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

What do Foos and Gilardi (2020) investigate and find?
(@Katharina)

Evidence on the critical mass

Table 2

Effect of women's victories on women's candidacies nearby.

Time	Time 2			
	Female candidates per contest		Female victors per contest	
Distance criteria	Contests within 75 miles	10 Closest contests	Contests within 75 miles	10 Closest contests
Woman won at time 1	0.028 (0.040)	0.007 (0.045)	0.021 (0.029)	0.004 (0.032)
Degree of polynomials	4	4	4	4
Constant	0.453* (0.028)	0.468* (0.030)	0.267* (0.021)	0.274* (0.022)
R^2	0.003	0.001	0.005	0.002
N	2404	2433	2404	2433

Notes: * = $p < .10$, all tests two-tailed. Sample sizes differ slightly between the columns because 29 state legislative districts in the US are so remotely located that no other districts exist within 75 miles of their centers. The Table shows that women's victories do not cause other women to run for office in other districts nearby.

Broockman (2014) finds no effect of successful female candidates on potential female candidates close by.

Survey on the reading



Excursion: On formulating research questions

Different questions, different goals

1. Should women represent women?
2. What would have happened to *Roe vs. Wade* if Hillary Clinton won the U.S. presidential elections in 2016?
3. How do political parties try to appeal to female voters?
4. How does direct democracy affect women's turnout?

Which type of questions do these examples pose?

Excursion: On formulating research questions

1. Should women represent women? → Normative questions
2. What would have happened to *Roe vs. Wade* if Hillary Clinton won the U.S. presidential elections in 2016? → Hypothetical questions
3. How do political parties try to appeal to female voters? → Descriptive questions
4. How does direct democracy affect women's turnout? → Causal-explanatory questions

For your term paper, you should focus on the latter, **causal explanatory questions**.

Excursion: On formulating research questions

How does a good research question look like?

Excursion: On formulating research questions

Powner (2014) lists some **dos** and **don'ts** in drafting research questions. **Dos**

- start with a puzzle for which there's no good answer available (on a subject you know already)
- a question should have a question mark (e.g., *how...?* or *why...?*)
- highlights the outcome, not the causes (these will be nevertheless important later!)
- relate to theory

Excursion: On formulating research questions

Don'ts

- ...have a clear, even tautological answer
- ...focus on a single case (do not use proper nouns, like states or persons in the research question, they should be more general)
- ...translate the relationship into empirical indicators in the question (e.g., talk about attitudes on gender equality, not attitudes on the question whether men and women should have equal rights on the labour market)

Prominent Role Models

- **Research Question:** Does a woman's ascension to a prominent political office cause other women to enter politics?
- **Main Argument:**
- **Data and Method:**
- **Results:**
- **Implications:**

How does the question perform on the criteria proposed by Powner (2014)? How do they relate their research to theories on representation (@Celine)?

Prominent Role Models

Ladam, Harden, and Windett (2018) refer to the conceptualization referred to by Pitkin (1967):

- main motivation: how can descriptive representation of women be improved?
- they follow literature that descriptive representation leads to substantive representation
- what's novel is their focus on *symbolic representation*: if women feel more represented, that could make them more prone to pursue a political career themselves

Excursion: On dissecting an argument

“A social science theory is a reasoned and precise speculation about the answer to a research question, including a statement about why the proposed answer is correct.” (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, p. 25)

Excursion: On dissecting an argument

Theories consist of four components:

1. **Expectations:** An expected relationship between X and Y
2. **Causal mechanisms:** Theoretical reasoning of why X leads to Y
3. **Assumptions:** Underlying (untested) claims of how subjects behave
4. **Scope conditions:** Limits in the applicability of the theory

In groups of four, try to dissect the argument by Ladam, Harden, and Windett (2018) into these four parts. [10 minutes]

Excursion: On dissecting an argument

1. **Expectations:** The presence of high-level female politicians increases the number of female candidates.
2. **Causal mechanisms:**
 - 2.1 **Symbolic** signal to other women that success in politics is possible → bolstering self-efficacy
 - 2.2 Increased size of **recruitment** pool for party leaders (women politicians encourage other female candidates)
3. **Assumptions:**
 - generally, citizen base their decisions on what happens to people in their reference network
 - specifically, female candidates base their decision to run on issues relating to gender
 - moreover, visibility of female politicians (transferability to other contexts, @Bennett?)

Excursion: On dissecting an argument

4. **Scope conditions:**

- As the theory depends on visibility, expectation only applies to high-level offices.
- High-level female politicians only serve as a tipping point for those women with high likelihood of running

They define one more moderating variable, which one is it and why?

Excursion: On dissecting an argument

They expect the effect to be more pronounced in lower houses than upper houses

- generally, they focus on entry-level positions
- first-time candidates appear to target positions in lower houses more often

Excursion: On dissecting an argument

- **Research Question:** Does a woman's ascension to a prominent political office cause other women to enter politics?
- **Main Argument:** Presence of female politicians in high-level offices leads to more women running for (low-level) offices
- **Data and Method:**
- **Results:**
- **Implications:**

Data and Method

They use information on state-level candidates from the “State Legislative Elections Returns” dataset.

- includes data on all states in the U.S. from 1978-2012
- they infer the gender of a candidate by their name (**Question by Greta:** “...and what methodological problems could arise in this process?”)
- different measures being used:
 1. share of female candidates
 2. share of female candidates by chamber
 3. share of female election winners

What is, as usual, the problem in identifying the causal relationship between female role models and the share of female candidates?

Data and Method

High likelihood of effect endogeneity: more role models → more female candidates or is there a dynamic that influences both at the same time? (e.g. quotas)

They deal with it in a time-series, cross-sectional design

- simply including controls may not work because some of them might be affected by the presence of a role model themselves (cf. *post-treatment bias*)
- they basically use a two-step approach
 1. in the first model, they model the likelihood of a female governor/senator in office (e.g. regional peculiarities, history of a female governor in office, state citizen and government ideology, female sociopolitical subculture)

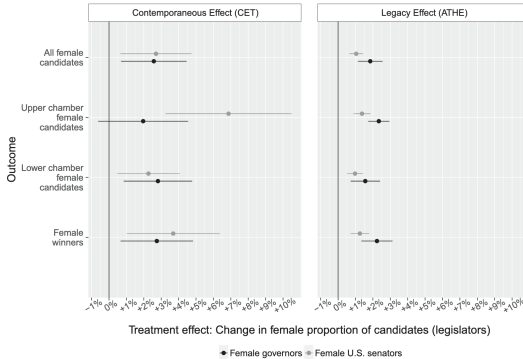
Data and Method

2. in the second model, they use this "corrected version" of the treatment (female governor in office) as the outcome of interest
3. they then obtain a 'contemporaneous treatment effect' and an 'average treatment history effect' (*what's the difference?*)

Data and Method

- **Research Question:** Does a woman's ascension to a prominent political office cause other women to enter politics?
- **Main Argument:** Presence of female politicians in high-level offices leads to more women running for (low-level) offices
- **Data and Method:** Data on state- and top-level candidates in the U.S. (1978-2012), reweighted to estimate a causal effect
- **Results:**
- **Implications:**

Findings



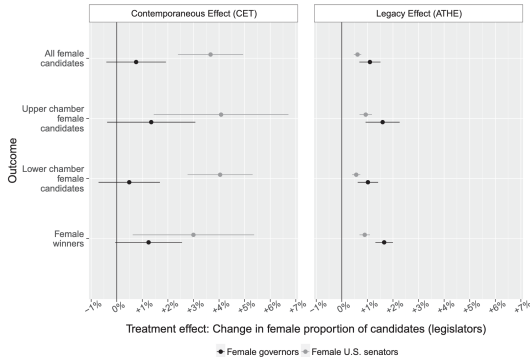
What's supported by the evidence, what's not?

Findings

Generally,

- female role models increase the share of women in politics, in both chambers
- effect strength similar for both chambers (lower house not a major moderator)
- on average, one female governor/senator leads to seven more female candidates in a state election
- the effect is strongest whenever a woman enters a high-level office for a first time and declines afterwards

Findings



And what's the mechanism at play?

Findings

- **Research Question:** Does a woman's ascension to a prominent political office cause other women to enter politics?
- **Main Argument:** Presence of female politicians in high-level offices leads to more women running for (low-level) offices
- **Data and Method:** Data on state- and top-level candidates in the U.S. (1978-2012), reweighted to estimate a causal effect
- **Results:** High-level female politicians successfully signals other women to consider pursuing a political career
- **Implications:**

Everything said?

Question by Bennett: Is it desirable to focus on overcoming the gender gap in candidate's emergence just based on an elite group of potential female candidates?

...and relatedly **question by Marina and Vincent:** To what extent does the intersectionality of women need to be considered when seeking to increase the number of female office holders via identification with role models?

Implications

- **Research Question:** Does a woman's ascension to a prominent political office cause other women to enter politics?
- **Main Argument:** Presence of female politicians in high-level offices leads to more women running for (low-level) offices
- **Data and Method:** Data on state- and top-level candidates in the U.S. (1978-2012), reweighted to estimate a causal effect
- **Results:** High-level female politicians successfully signals other women to consider pursuing a political career
- **Implications:** Once there is (meaningful) political representation of women, more women might consider politics

What we've learned today...

- we talked about the idea of the 'critical mass'
- we saw an empirical test of how female legislators can serve as role models for other female politicians
- on a more general level, we discussed good research questions and learned how to de-compose an argument into its different parts

To prepare for the week after next...

- next week, there is again no session (EPSA conference)
- the week after next, we'll have our final substantive session in which we will talk about gender-inclusive language and its connection to politics
- Main reading:
 - **Pérez EO and Tavits M** (2019) Language Influences Public Attitudes toward Gender Equality. *The Journal of Politics* **81** (1), 81–93. ISSN: 0022-3816. DOI: [10.1086/700004](https://doi.org/10.1086/700004)
- Complementary reading
 - **Waldendorf A** (2024) Words of Change: The Increase of Gender-Inclusive Language in German Media. *European Sociological Review* **40** (2), 357–374. ISSN: 0266-7215. DOI: [10.1093/esr/jcad044](https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcad044)

To prepare for the week after next...

- **Colombo F and Widmann T (2025)** Voters Affective and Threat Response to Gender-Inclusive Language: Evidence from German Politicians.

Thank you for your attention!
Any further questions?

Literature

-  **Broockman DE (2014)** Do Female Politicians Empower Women to Vote or Run for Office? A Regression Discontinuity Approach. *Electoral Studies* **34**, 190–204.
-  **Colombo F and Widmann T (2025)** Voters Affective and Threat Response to Gender-Inclusive Language: Evidence from German Politicians.
-  **Foos F and Gilardi F (2020)** Does Exposure to Gender Role Models Increase Women's Political Ambition? A Field Experiment with Politicians. *Journal of Experimental Political Science* **7** (3), 157–166.
-  **Kanter RM (1977)** Some Effects of Proportions on Group Life: Skewed Sex Ratios and Responses to Token Women. *American Journal of Sociology* **82** (5), 965–990.

Literature

-  **King G, Keohane RO, and Verba S (1994)** *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research, New Edition*. Princeton University Press, 1994.
-  **Ladam C, Harden JJ, and Windett JH (2018)** Prominent Role Models: High-Profile Female Politicians and the Emergence of Women as Candidates for Public Office. *American Journal of Political Science* **62** (2), 369–381.
-  **Pérez EO and Tavits M (2019)** Language Influences Public Attitudes toward Gender Equality. *The Journal of Politics* **81** (1), 81–93.
-  **Pitkin HF (1967)** *The Concept of Representation*. University of California Press, 1967.

Literature



Powner LC (2014) *Empirical Research and Writing: A Political Science Student's Practical Guide*. CQ Press, 2014.



Waldendorf A (2024) Words of Change: The Increase of Gender-Inclusive Language in German Media. *European Sociological Review* **40** (2), 357–374.



Yoder JD (1991) Rethinking Tokenism: Looking Beyond Numbers. *Gender & Society* **5** (2), 178–192.