

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE INTRODUCTION

# Reevaluating the Contingent “Yes”: Essays on “Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women?”

Suzanne Dovi<sup>1</sup> and Christina Wolbrecht<sup>2\*</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>University of Arizona, USA and <sup>2</sup>University of Notre Dame, USA

\*Corresponding author. Email: [wolbrecht.1@nd.edu](mailto:wolbrecht.1@nd.edu)

(Received 02 November 2021; revised 25 July 2022; accepted 29 July 2022)

## Introduction

Underlying almost every conversation about descriptive representation are questions about whether gender does and should always matter in politics. More specifically, those conversations rest on assumptions about whether political scientists should always evaluate the performance of political actors based on their membership in historically disadvantaged groups. How one answers that question can be problematic: A “yes” suggests that democratic citizens should evaluate the performance of members of historically disadvantaged groups using criteria (burdens?) beyond those used to evaluate members of privileged groups. A “no” seems to challenge the theoretical arguments for why the presence of historically disadvantaged groups is necessary. Admitting that not every woman in politics is a preferable descriptive representative for women seems to implicitly support having more men in politics and, thereby, the preferences that perpetuate male dominance in politics. Faced with such a quagmire of competing assumptions, those who study descriptive representation must balance concerns about essentializing women on one hand and reinforcing male dominance in politics on the other hand.

Instead of being paralyzed by these competing concerns, Jane Mansbridge’s influential 1999 essay “Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent ‘Yes’” acknowledged problems with descriptive representation while advancing a novel theoretical paradigm for investigating the political presence of women—that is, contingently. By arguing that descriptive representation is a contingent good—specifically, that the need for women in politics will depend on the desired function and context in which

women act—Mansbridge created a theoretical framework in which some women may fail to perform the functions desired of women in a certain political context, and the need for more women in politics persists. Similarly, some people of color may fail to perform the functions desired of them in a certain political context, and the need for more people of color in politics persists.

In particular, Mansbridge (1999, 628) identified four functions and their related contexts in which disadvantaged groups would want to be represented by someone who belongs to their group. Those four functions are

1. “adequate communication in contexts of mistrust,”
2. “innovative thinking in contexts of uncrystallized, not fully articulated, interests,”
3. “creating a social meaning of ‘ability to rule’ for members of a group in historical contexts where the ability has been seriously questioned,” and
4. “increasing the polity’s de facto legitimacy in contexts of past discrimination.”

By recognizing that the context not only determines what it means to be a woman in politics but also impacts the criteria by which women in politics are evaluated, Mansbridge suggests that political identities are gendered and that the relevance of those gendered political identities will vary with the context. Instead of assuming that some fixed essentialist nature of women dictates how female political actors should behave, Mansbridge offers a flexible theoretical framework. The genius of Mansbridge’s contingency argument is that it recognizes both how the justifications for descriptive representation are culturally and historically embedded and that those justifications may change with the political culture and times.

The impact of Mansbridge’s argument on political science cannot be exaggerated. According to Google Scholar, her article has been cited more than 2,800 times in the past 20 years. Of Mansbridge’s other works, only *Beyond Adversary Democracy* has been cited more. These citations reflect the extent to which Mansbridge’s contingency argument has shaped both empirical and theoretical discussions of descriptive representation. These Critical Perspectives essays are motivated by our desire to take stock of the impact and potential of Mansbridge’s path breaking article 20 years after its publication.

Although Mansbridge’s original discussion of contingency focused on both gender and race, the main focus of this Critical Perspectives collection for *Politics & Gender* is women’s intersectional identities and the ways that recent research enriches her analysis. In fact, many of the essays consider how Mansbridge’s framework can accommodate complex contingencies. For instance, Nadia Brown, Christopher J. Clark, Anna Mitchell Mahoney, and Michael Strawbridge demonstrate the instrumental role that Black women play in US congressional caucuses as a way to think about collective descriptive representation in legislatures. Christina Xydias recommends attention to shared experiences as key to evaluating descriptive representation in specific contexts and by specific actors. Kendall D. Funk and Magda Hinojosa show how the self-presentation of

descriptive representatives affects their performance and impact. Amanda Clayton, Diana Z. O'Brien, and Jennifer Piscopo complicate Mansbridge's theoretical paradigm by arguing for explicitly attending to how power manifests itself within certain contexts. In "Descriptive Representative under Group Conflict Scenarios," Katherine Tate explores the obstacles that prevent descriptive representation from being transformative. Lara Greaves and Jennifer Curtin provide a compelling example from New Zealand regarding how Indigenous groups are excluded by design, revealing the limits of contingency under specific conditions of oppression. Mansbridge herself engages with these arguments and considers the legacy of this work in the final essay in this collection.

Thus, this Critical Perspectives collection builds on Mansbridge's theoretical framework and introduces new ways of understanding descriptive representation as a contingent good. All of these essays open up new directions for researching the contingency of descriptive representation as originally introduced by Jane Mansbridge, a project that remains both necessary and fruitful.

**Suzanne Dovi** is Professor of the School of Government and Public Policy at the University of Arizona: [sdovi@arizona.edu](mailto:sdovi@arizona.edu)

**Christina Wolbrecht** is Professor of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame: [wolbrecht.1@nd.edu](mailto:wolbrecht.1@nd.edu)

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**Cite this article:** Suzanne Dovi and Christina Wolbrecht. 2023. "Reevaluating the Contingent "Yes": Essays on "Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women?"". *Politics & Gender* 19, 1231–1233. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X22000277>