Online Book Reviews

Thematic Review: Women in Power: The Fight for a Seat in the Boys’ Club


doi:10.1017/S1743923X19000382, e14

Shan-Jan Sarah Liu
University of Edinburgh

In 1967, Hannah Pitkin’s The Concept of Representation facilitated the beginning of a conceptual analysis of what political representation means and how it is practiced (Pitkin [1967] 2013). Pitkin classified representation into different types, challenging the previous one-dimensional understanding of representation and democracy. Since then, numerous studies exploring the political representation of women have been published. Given how patriarchal formal institutions are by nature, it is difficult for women to occupy a space in the political arena (Kenny 2013, 34–62; Mackay et al. 2010). Therefore, gender scholars have investigated the systematic barriers women face when entering
politics. For example, women are less ambitious (Fox and Lawless 2010) and more risk averse (Kanthak and Woon 2015), making them unlikely to run in elections. Electoral systems, political parties, and gender quotas also influence the likelihood of women being nominated for candidacy (Caul 2001; Paxton et al. 2010; Tripp and Kang 2008). Many scholars have also offered original arguments, as well as reconsiderations of the supply and demand theory and the critical mass theory, to explain women’s access to political power (Childs and Krook 2008; Krook 2010; Norrander and Wilcox 1998; Norris and Lovenduski 1993). Many studies have examined the impact of women’s political representation, illustrating that women make a substantive policy impact as well as symbolic social impact (Alexander 2012; Atchison 2015; Liu and Banaszak 2017; Barnes and Burchard 2013; Franceschet 2011; Wolbrecht and Campbell 2017). Although some of these findings are context specific (e.g., Liu 2018), generally, women’s political presence is believed to be beneficial for transforming traditional gender roles because it normalizes women’s occupation of powerful positions. These three books, in addition, move a step forward by inspecting American women political leaders’ experiences in gaining a seat at the table. They engage how American women act upon their power as authority figures. Through relevant new data on and analysis of women’s political representation, these books enhance our understanding of the effect of gender in one’s experiences in political institutions.

Although the last few decades have witnessed progress, the political sphere in the United States is still far from gender parity. In fact, the United States currently ranks 79th in the world in the proportion of seats held by women in the lower house. The United States also holds one of the lowest percentages of female legislators among Western democracies. These statistics indicate the hardship that American women endure to be political leaders. Recognizing the strenuous efforts that women make to attain public office in the United States, these three books offer insight into the actions of female political leaders in respect to advancing women’s status and to changing the culture within American political institutions. On the one hand, Mahoney, Dittmar et al., and Bashevkin detail the challenges that women collectively face. On the other hand, the authors also recognize that these burdens do not weigh equally on all women: women’s myriad identities, statuses, and experiences also play a role in how they act as leaders. Providing first-person narratives, especially Women Take Their Place in State Legislatures and A Seat at the Table, we get a glimpse of what it is like to be a woman in a male-dominated sphere fighting for her own space.
Women Take Their Place in State Legislatures, by Anna Mitchell Mahoney, tracks the development of women’s caucuses at the state level. Using both quantitative and qualitative analyses of interviews with 180 state legislators and their staff in New Jersey, Colorado, Pennsylvania, and Iowa between 2006 and 2010, Mahoney explains various factors that motivate women to form, join, and lead caucuses and the opportunities, resources, and frames women use to advance their agendas. Mahoney offers a comprehensive account of the extent to which gender identity has been employed by women legislators when organizing for caucuses, leading to some successes and some failures. She argues that the outcomes of these collective efforts are context specific. For example, she finds that Iowan female legislators generally lack a gender consciousness, which leads them to believe that a woman’s caucus is futile, resulting in the failure to establish one. Conversely, women legislators in Colorado prioritize bipartisan participation over conflicting policy positions and have male colleagues who do not see such collective action as a threat, enabling a caucus to emerge. Mahoney analyzes a rich body of data, offering perspectives that we would otherwise not have access to. However, the book could benefit from a further elaboration on why these four states are comparable before reaching its conclusion. Despite the shortcoming, the study contributes to the broader scholarship on collective action and political opportunity by offering a valuable update on the elite women’s movement — an area that needs (re)visiting as so much has happened since the first two waves of feminist movements.

A Seat at the Table, by Kelly Dittmar, Kira Sanbonmatsu, and Susan J. Carroll, investigates the influence of women legislators on public policy when there is a record high presence of women, as well as an extreme polarization by party in Congress. Dittmar et al.’s extensive interviews with over 75% of the women serving in the 114th Congress (2015–2017) provide a close look at how women cope with partisan divisions and persevere in a male-dominated institution. They also reveal how women view the effectiveness of their representation, advocating the importance of women’s political presence. Complementing Mahony’s book, Dittmar et al.’s data analysis suggests that women legislators face myriad obstacles and opportunities when navigating a gendered institution and also influencing the gendered culture beyond the legislature. Through the narratives of women political actors on the front line, the book successfully conveys the message that women’s political presence matters for the sustainment of a representative democracy. Furthermore, Dittmar et al.’s attention to the intersections of gender,
race, ethnicity, sexuality, seniority, geography, district, and political party affecting women’s legislative behavior in representing their constituents deserves appreciation. Dittmar et al. demonstrate that minority women legislators communicate their commitment to representing both women and people of color both substantively and symbolically. These women’s reflections of their legislative experiences depict how they define and cultivate their presence in giving a voice to the underrepresented and in showing the underrepresented that they, too, belong. Dittmar et al.’s approach enables the marginalized women to help foster objectivity in the political world (Harding 1995). Incorporating a feminist critique, though, I would have also liked to see some evidence to substantiate the assumption that “the subaltern can speak” (Spivak 1988) via political representation. As mentioned in their conclusion, more objective measures of women’s policy impact should be the next step to interrogating the extent to which women legislators truly represent the disadvantaged.

Women as Foreign Policy Leaders, by Sylvia Bashevkin, examines the role of gender in foreign diplomacy. By tracing the tenure of four high-profile appointees of senior national security positions in the US executive branch during both the Republican and Democratic administrations since 1980, Bashevkin evaluates the impact of Jeane Kirkpatrick, Madeleine Albright, Condoleezza Rice, and Hillary Rodham Clinton. Pursuing a political career as a member of the US executive branch fundamentally presents different barriers and opportunities and thus requires Kirkpatrick, Albright, Rice, and Clinton to employ different strategies from perhaps those of members of the legislature. By studying how these women navigate a male-dominated domain, Bashevkin monitors their muscular approaches to diplomacy, as well as their divergent views on women’s rights as an international human rights issue. Through the analysis of various primary and secondary sources, including memoirs, biographies, diaries, speeches, media reports, etc., Bashevkin provides insight into these four women’s views and use of feminism to advance the agenda of their party, their government, and themselves. Expanding upon the works of feminist historians, Bashevkin’s aim to provide a feminist analysis of some of these women’s defeminization (or masculinization as Bashevkin would characterize it) of themselves and their agendas as national security leaders is laudable. Indeed, little scholarship has produced such a detailed account of top women’s leadership, especially their adoption of a masculine repertoire in an extremely masculine space. Nonetheless, the book could
benefit from a more explicit discussion of the structural constraints placed upon Kirkpatrick, Albright, Rice, and Clinton when exercising their decision-making power.

Common patterns emerge in these three books that collectively contribute to our comprehension of women’s political representation. Each contribution also provides unprecedented theoretical and empirical underpinning for the politics of gender. For the purpose of this review, I focus on three themes, although they may be interpreted differently by the authors, that surface in these books: party division, intersectionality, and motherhood. First, taking party division and polarization into consideration, the authors point out the impediment of both the Republican and Democratic women balancing their gender identity and party affiliation among many other characteristics they possess. As women of the two major parties differ in their outlooks on gender equality, political ideology, and issue position, they constantly negotiate their gender and party identities as they seek to represent their supporters and fight to have a voice in a boys’ club.

Second, drawing from extensive interviews, both Mahoney’s and Dittmar’s books acknowledge that political institutions are not just gendered but also highly intersectional. In particular, Dittmar et al. contend that race and ethnicity are the most relevant factors in shaping the way minority women represent minority women, especially African American women. Such finding implicates the double burden (or double opportunity) that minority legislators face: to represent across gender, racial, and party lines. More importantly, the multiple identities of female legislators suggest that the intersections of gender with race and other categories make representation possible for some. In addition to substantive representation, the impact of women, particularly women of color, translates beyond the legislature. Women leaders empower women as their presence challenges the normalized presumption of what a member of Congress looks like.

A distinguishing aspect of Bashevkin’s book is that she is only able to examine the impact of race and ethnicity on these four women’s political careers to a certain degree — Rice is the only woman of color national security leader in United States history. This limitation directly implicates the racialized nature of American politics, especially as women climb up the political ladder to hold the highest level of position. Bashevkin resorts to identities other than race and ethnicity when tracing the career developments of Kirkpatrick, Albright, Rice, and Clinton. Consequently, she offers a comprehensive account of how the personal
backgrounds of these four women — e.g., socioeconomic class, activism, peer and family influence and interactions, and educational degree and scholarship — affect their role and position when in government.

Third, a common identity and concern — motherhood — transcends race, ethnicity, and party affiliation. Both Women Take Their Place in State Legislatures and A Seat at the Table present a powerful investigation of how female lawmakers view their own roles as mothers. Family status and motherhood are challenges that female legislators must combat in their private lives. In addition, motherhood is also a hotly contested issue directly related to women’s reproductive health and rights, concerning women they represent in the public sphere. Yet, homogeneity does not exist in their stances on reproductive access, rights, and justice, even when many women legislators share uniform challenges of motherhood. The lack of solidarity on reproductive issues makes it difficult for women to work collectively towards the greater good. However, Dittmar et al. argue that women of varying identities bring diverse perspectives to the Congress, allowing a wider range of voices to be included in policy debates.

Women as Foreign Policy Leaders distinguishes itself again from the others in that it focuses on foreign diplomacy — possibly the least motherly or feminine matter in the eyes of the state and the general public. Nonetheless, Bashevkin also discusses, although not extensively, the relationships that Kirkpatrick, Albright, Rice, and Clinton have with their mothers and/or grandmothers, as well as their own motherhood (with the exception of Rice, who has never had children). Different from the first-person narratives carried out in Women Take Their Place in State Legislatures and A Seat at the Table, Women as Foreign Policy Leaders details the presence of motherly figures in these four women’s lives. However, perhaps due to data constraints, Bashevkin does not offer much explicit interpretation of the way these motherly figures and motherhood influence their political paths. Similar to Mahoney’s and Dittmar et al.’s light touch on women legislators’ identification of mothers and association with motherhood, Bashevkin leaves us to yearn for an even more critical analysis of the role of motherhood in the construction of global power — not just within the domestic institution but also international institutions, as national security leaders deal directly with global issues that concern the development, peace, livelihood, and sustainability of future generations.

Although the strategies of different politicians in presenting themselves may vary, it is refreshing to see motherhood being discussed in all three
books, as it is a crucial identity to many women policymakers and women constituents. Nonetheless, lacking in these three books are answers to questions surrounding the body politics of women legislators, which dictates how much women can be present politically, how women can be perceived as viable candidates and leaders, and how women can represent their constituents broadly. Excluding the body politics of women legislators, the authors miss an opportunity to further interrogate the practices and policies through which political institutions regulate, gender, and racialize a woman’s body.

A crucial feature of these three books concerns the larger context in which women struggle with securing a spot in the political arena — essentially and historically a boys’ club. All of them examine how American women behave individually, as well as collectively, once they reach powerful positions. These three books have many significant overlapping areas, reflecting the need to recognize women’s experiences across party lines and the urgency to increase women’s access to political power. In this sense, these works complement one another, as well as prior literature on women’s political representation in the United States. They also raise questions about how women leaders in other contexts overcome barriers and view their own influence. Not only do these books expand our knowledge of women’s experiences as they negotiate their belonging in the political arena, they also encourage us to critically reflect upon the various factors that shape their positionalities within the American legislative body. In sum, these three books make groundbreaking theoretical and empirical contributions. They open the door for future scholarship that does not treat women as a monolithic group but instead takes an intersectional approach to analyzing the role of key political actors.

Shan-Jan Sarah Liu is Lecturer of Gender and Politics at the University of Edinburgh: sarah.liu@ed.ac.uk

REFERENCES


