

When politics is not just a man's game: Women's representation and political engagement

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Abstract

Although women appear to be less interested and less engaged in politics than men, some evidence suggests that the presence of women as candidates and office holders can help to stimulate political engagement among women. Using data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), we investigate how the election of women in national legislatures influences women's political engagement and attitudes about the political process across 35 countries. We find that sex differences in political engagement as well as political attitudes are apparent in a large number of countries. We find also that female representation is positively associated with attitudes about the political process; however, these effects, while weak, are seen among both men and women. © 2007 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Past research has shown that both institutional and cultural factors are related to women's representation (e.g. Matland, 1998; Rule, 1987). However, less is known about what effects, if any, such representation has on political engagement and attitudes about the political process. Although women appear to be less interested and less engaged in politics than men, some have suggested that the presence of women as candidates and office holders can help to stimulate political engagement among women. Studies within the U.S. context have found that the presence of female candidates and

representatives appears to increase women's political knowledge (Verba et al., 1997), political interest and engagement (Atkeson, 2003; Hansen, 1997), and political discussion (Campbell and Wolbrecht, 2006). In this paper, we use a cross-national approach to investigate how the election of women in national legislatures influences the political engagement and efficacy of women using data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES).

2. Women in the political arena

A number of studies have found that women are generally less interested (Jennings and Niemi, 1981; Verba et al., 1995) and less knowledgeable than men about politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). While these studies have been focused on the U.S., similar differences also have been found elsewhere (Christy, 1987; Inglehart, 1981; Inglehart and Norris, 2003).

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Differential resources and lower levels of psychological involvement in politics helps to explain some of the sex differences in political activity, but there is no clear answer as to why women are less interested in politics than men. The gap between men and women in political interest remains even after controlling for socialization, resource and institutional explanations (Burns et al., 2001). In order to explain the remaining gap, some scholars have focused their attention on aspects of the political context that reflect the paucity of women in office and their subsequent invisibility in the political realm.

The presence of women either as candidates or as policy-makers is thought to influence the levels of women's engagement in at least two important ways. First, women's policy issues are more likely to reach the campaign agenda when women candidates and more woman friendly policies may be passed in legislatures where women hold a higher proportion of seats (for example, see Childs and Withey, 2004). Elections have the potential to cue gender relevance when women's issues are debated in a campaign or when women run for political office (Banducci and Karp, 2000; Sapiro and Conover, 1997). There is also a link between female candidacies and social issues; while men and women are likely to employ similar campaign strategies, women are more likely to campaign on social issues (Dabelko and Herrnson, 1997).

Second, women as candidates or in positions of power may serve as a powerful symbolic cue that 'politics is not just a man's game'. Burns et al. suggest that when women live in an environment where women seek and hold public office they are more likely to know and care about politics (Burns et al., 2001, p. 383). Campbell and Wolbrecht (2006) find that the visibility of women politicians in the news inspires political engagement among adolescent girls. Similarly, Atkeson (2003) finds that women are more likely to discuss politics and have higher levels of efficacy when women ran for state-wide office in competitive races. Women are also more likely to be aware of female candidates and are more likely to be interested in the campaign when women compete (Burns et al., 2001). They estimate that the presence of even a single female contesting or occupying a state-wide public office is enough to close the gender gap in political interest and political knowledge by more than half; moreover if women were represented equally in politics, the disparity in political engagement would be wiped out (Burns et al., 2001, pp. 354–355). Other studies provide further evidence that the presence of women makes a difference. Hansen (1997) finds that the presence of a female Senate candidate on the ballot

is associated with an increase in a women's attempt to persuade others to vote.

Other studies, however, have failed to find any substantive impact. Dolan (2006) examines the increased presence of women candidates in the United States over a 14-year period and finds little support that their symbolic presence translates into an increase in political attitudes and behaviours. Koch (1997) also fails to find any impact of candidate sex on political interest. The contradictory results from the studies of women candidates may result from their focus on electoral campaigns. While there may be a 'novelty factor', such effects may fade as more women run for political office. In addition, many female candidates in the U.S. are running as challengers in low visibility elections with little chance of winning given the nature of the incumbency advantage. Research on losers shows they are more likely to be dissatisfied with the political system and that repeated losses may result in lower turnout and trust (Anderson et al., 2005, pp. 68–69). This suggests that any positive impact associated with women's initial presence as candidates may be offset by dissatisfaction when women see female candidates losing.

While the evidence is mixed regarding the impact of women seeking office, there may be a mobilization effect that follows from women holding positions of political power. The presence of female candidates suggests that women can compete for political power but the presence of women in elected bodies suggests that they play a role in decision making and are able to influence policy outcomes. In this way, women may come to see representative institutions as more responsive. Past studies provide evidence for this effect. Women feel better about government when more women are included in positions of power (Mansbridge, 1999). When women are better represented on municipal legislative bodies, women are likely to be more trusting of [local] government (Ulbig, 2005). They are also likely to feel better about their representatives in Congress when they are women (Lawless, 2004).

3. Women's descriptive representation

The evidence discussed above on elected women is consistent with a growing amount of evidence that descriptive representation enhances political support and engagement among minority groups. While most of the research in this area is based on the U.S. it shows that having a representative of 'one's own' can increase participation (Barreto et al., 2004; Gay, 2001; Tate, 1991), reduce alienation (Pantoja and Segura, 2003), increase political efficacy (Banducci et al., 2004, 2005)

and trust in government (Howell and Fagan, 1988).¹ The creation of majority minority districts in the United States and special arrangements used elsewhere are designed to facilitate minority representation (see Lijphart, 1986). A number of countries employ similar rules to help guarantee that women also gain representation. Some countries, for example, set aside a certain number of reserved seats that are only open to women (Norris, 2004). Other countries employ legislative quotas that require all parties to nominate a certain percentage of women. Parties may also set their own quotas that aim to increase the proportion of women among party candidates. In recent years more than a hundred countries have adopted legislative quotas for the selection of female candidates to political office (Krook, 2006). In June 2000 France became the first country in the world to require by law an equal number of male and female candidates for most elections (Bird, 2005). While these laws guarantee women candidates, they do not necessarily guarantee female representation. Following the implementation of the parity law in France, the proportion of elected women rose by only 1.4% to 12.3% largely because the female nominees were concentrated in unwinnable constituencies (Norris, 2004, p. 196). The use of such measures to advance the representation of women clearly follows from the *expectation* that women's representation makes a difference.

There is clear evidence that PR enhances the representation of women in national legislatures (Rule, 1994; see also Lijphart, 1999). However, mechanisms such as party quotas are shown to be more influential at increasing women's representation than proportional representation (Caul, 2001). Furthermore, the representation of women is more dependent on the responsiveness of parties to pressure to nominate women (both to appeal to voters and satisfy intra-party demands). Clearly more female candidates are a necessary precondition to higher levels of women's representation in parliaments (see Darcy et al., 1994, on this point). In new democracies, political parties play a particularly important role in helping women become candidates as women are more likely to lack the political resources necessary to reach a critical mass that would allow them to reach beyond just token representation (Matland, 1998).

The representation of women and minorities may not only provide a powerful symbolic impact that politics is a woman's game as well as a man's; it also has policy consequences. Favourable policies toward women could also prove to be influential in shaping political attitudes and behaviour. Comparative studies have focused on the influence of elected women officials, as a politically underrepresented group, on policy outcomes (Bratton and Ray, 2002; O'Regan, 2000; Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler, 2005). The objective of these studies has been to determine if there is indeed a connection between the proportion of female policymakers and policies dealing with women's issues in various countries. Female legislators, be it through their presence in legislative bodies (Studlar and McAllister, 2002) or through the effect they have on increasing the importance given to gender equality and social welfare policy (Lovenduski and Norris, 2003) may be more effectively representing the interests of women in the electorate.

All of this suggests that women should be responsive to the context of women's representation as the political system is more responsive to them. Therefore, the election of more women to national office should have a positive influence on political attitudes and behaviour. While there have been a number of studies that have investigated the influence of women in politics on engagement, few, if any, have looked at this from a cross national perspective. In their study of gender and political participation, Burns et al. (2001, p. 349) suggest the need for a cross national approach.² We take this approach by examining how women's representation influences political attitudes and behaviour across a diverse range of countries that vary in terms of the number of women elected to national office.

4. Data

We rely on data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) as the basis for our empirical analysis. The project involves the collaboration of national election study teams who administered a common module of questions in surveys coinciding with a national election. Module 2, administered between 2001–2006 includes a battery of questions on various forms of political participation, that include political

¹ In one exception to the U.S. focus, Fennema and Tillie (1999) find that increased representation of ethnic minorities on municipal councils and voter turnout are linked. However, they also find that ethnic minorities (with the exception of Turks) have lower rates of participation and trust than the majority population.

² They undertook a preliminary analysis of Eurobarometer data to investigate whether there was an association between the proportion of women in a nation's parliament and women's psychological engagement in politics. Bivariate correlations revealed no significant differences.

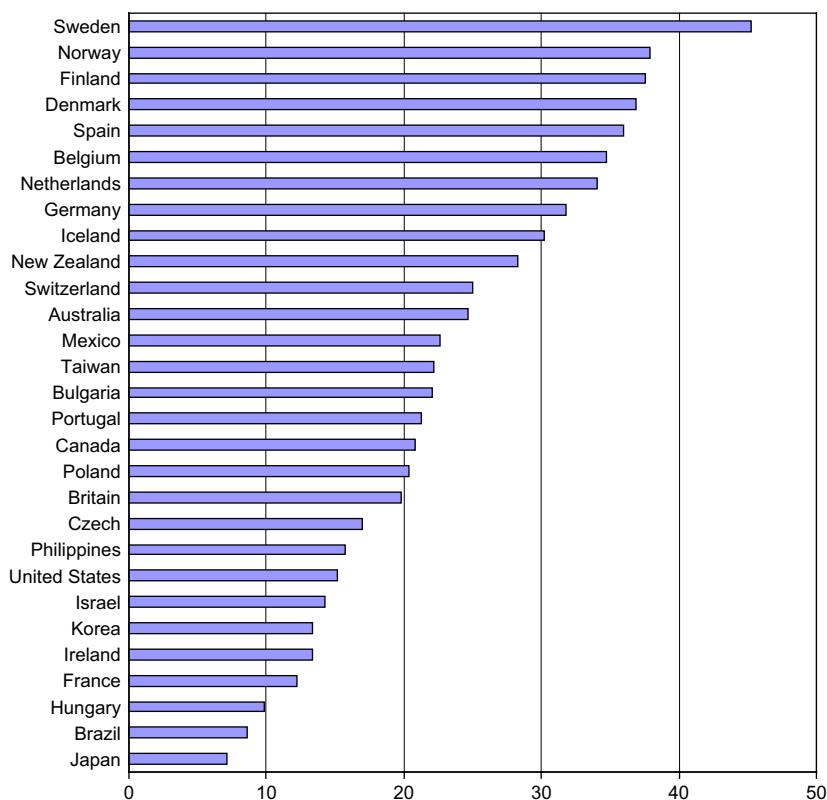


Fig. 1. Women's representation in national parliaments (lower house). Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union.

discussion, working on a campaign, contacting politicians, voting, and political protest. The module also includes questions that ask citizens to evaluate the political process; whether leaders represent views, voters views represented well, and satisfaction with democracy. The full release of CSES Module 2 contains responses from over 50,000 respondents across 41 election studies. Of these we use data from 35 countries.³ Eight of these countries, Belgium, Brazil, France, Korea, Mexico, Peru, the Philippines and Taiwan, employed legislative gender quotas or reserved seats in parliament at the time of the survey (IDEA).⁴ All but five of the countries have electoral systems that are based on proportional representation. These systems often employ party lists that are known to facilitate

women's representation. As Fig. 1 reveals, the representation of women varies considerably across the CSES sample. On average, 22 percent of the members of parliament in the lower house are women. The sample includes five Nordic countries which have among the highest proportion of women represented in national parliaments in the world. Women comprise over 35 percent of the lower house in Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Denmark. In contrast, 10 countries have 15 percent or fewer women in parliament. Japan, Albania, and Brazil have the lowest levels of women in parliament. Women in established democracies are better represented than those in newer democracies; on average 26 percent of the lower house are women in established democracies compared to 17 percent in newer democracies.

Previous research leads us to expect that men are likely to be more politically engaged and more satisfied with the political process than women. Table 1 provides a summary of responses to a series of items that measure political engagement across the entire CSES sample.⁵ Three items ask about long term political involvement

³ Multiple datasets from Germany, Portugal and Taiwan were deposited with the CSES. We use the Portugal (2002), the Taiwan (2001) and the Germany (telephone). Election studies from Russia (2004), Kyrgyzstan (2005) and Taiwan (2004) are not included in the analysis because they were presidential rather than parliamentary elections. The French 2002 study is included in the analysis because the survey was administered between presidential and parliamentary elections.

⁴ Portugal adopted quotas for women in 2006.

⁵ Data are weighted by the sampling weight when provided by the collaborators.

Table 1
Political engagement by sex of respondent (%)

	Men	Women	Difference
(Have you) contacted a politician or government official either in person, or in writing, or some other way?	14.6	10.9	–3.7
(Have you) worked together with people who shared the same concern?	20.1	15.8	–4.3
(Have you) taken part in a protest, march or demonstration?	10.6	8.7	–1.9
(Did you) talk to other people to persuade them to vote for a particular party or candidate?	23.0	17.8	–5.2
(Did you) show your support for a particular party or candidate by, for example, attending a meeting, putting up a poster, or in some other way?	13.1	9.8	–3.3

(see Table 1). ‘Over the past five years have you done any of the following things [contact, write, protest] to express your views about something the government should or should not be doing?’ On average less than a fifth report having participated in any activity though this varies widely across countries.⁶ In the United States, for example, 35 percent report having worked with other people who share a similar concern, while only four percent report doing so in Japan. The CSES also asked two questions about campaign involvement. Just over 20 percent of the respondents across the CSES sample report having tried to persuade others to support a particular candidate or party. As with indicators of past activity, fewer women report having done engaged in campaign related activities than men. Fewer than 15 percent report having demonstrated their support for a candidate or party by putting up a poster or attending a meeting. Similarly, fewer women report having demonstrated their support for a party or candidate by attending a meeting or putting up a poster.

Sex differences are also evident in political attitudes. The CSES includes several questions designed to measure attitudes about the democratic process. Among these is a question asking citizens whether they approve or disapprove of the way democracy works in their country. The measure frequently appears on Eurobarometer

Table 2
Political attitudes by sex of respondent (%)

	Men	Women	Difference
On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in [country]?	56.3	53.9	–2.4
Thinking about how elections in [country] work in practice, how well do elections ensure that the views of voters are represented by Majority Parties?	45.4	44.9	–0.5
Would you say that any of the parties in [country] represents your views reasonably well?	57.6	53.0	–4.6
Regardless of how you feel about the parties, would you say that any of the individual party leaders / presidential candidates at the last election represents your views reasonably well?	51.2	47.4	–3.8

and World Values surveys and is intended to measure support for the political system (Karp et al, 2003; Norris, 1999). Table 2 summarizes responses from those who reported being either very or fairly satisfied with the way democracy works. Not only are women less likely to be engaged in the political process they are also somewhat less satisfied than men. Another question that is unique to the CSES is an item asking if elections reflect the views of citizens. We report those who responded very well or quite well. On this item there does not appear to be a difference between men and women. The CSES also asks specifically about whether citizens believe that parties and leaders represent their views.⁷ Like the other items, women on average are somewhat less likely to believe that parties or leaders represent them particularly well.

The results in Tables 1 and 2 suggest that sex differentiation exists but it is unclear from these figures how responses vary across countries. It is quite possible that sizeable differences may exist in a few countries and not exist in others. To investigate this further, we examine the nature and size of sex differences in political engagement and attitudes for each of the 35 countries in the sample. We construct an indicator of engagement which takes on a value of 1 if the respondent reported taking part in any of the three prior activities listed in Table 1. Campaign activity takes on a value of 1 if the respondent reported having tried to persuade others to

⁶ We assume that those who gave no response did not engage in the activity.

⁷ Response categories are limited to yes or no.

vote in a certain way or demonstrating support for a party or a candidate by attending a meeting or putting up a poster. As suggested earlier, these differences may result from socio-structural factors such as differences in educational attainment or labour force involvement. To control for these factors, we estimate country specific models that include education, which ranges from no education (1) to a university degree (8), age, marital status, and whether children are present in the household. We also control for whether the respondent is employed either part or full time as participation in the labour force has been found to have a positive effect on women's political activity (Welch, 1977). Given that our dependent variables are either ordinal or dichotomous, we use logit models to estimate the parameters.

Table 3 reports the estimated coefficients for respondent sex once controlling for socio-economic variables in the political engagement models.⁸ Significant sex differences are evident in 24 of the 35 countries. In all but one case, women are less likely to be engaged than men. To ease the interpretation of the logit coefficient we also provide estimates of the impact of being female (when significant) on the probability of moving from no involvement to at least one activity holding all other variables constant at their mean values. Although there are significant sex differences in many countries, the size of the differences are not substantial. The largest difference is in Albania where women are eight percent less likely than men to have engaged in at least one past activity. Similar differences are evident in France, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, the Philippines and Israel. New Zealand is the only case where women are more active than men with an estimated difference of three percent. Sex differentiation in campaign involvement is also evident in many of the same countries. The size of the differences is somewhat greater. For example, in Germany, women are nine percent less likely than men to engage in one campaign activity. No significant differences on either measure are evident in seven countries, including the United States, where the gender gap has been a source of concern and generated a considerable amount of scholarship.

Table 4 summarizes the results using the same model specification across the items measuring political attitudes. Fewer sex differences exist on satisfaction with democracy and assessments about elections than the items that measure attitudes toward parties and leaders. Moreover, the sex differences on assessments about

Table 3

Sex differences in political engagement by country

	Logit coefficients					
	Engage			Campaign		
	Coef.		Prob.	Coef.		Prob.
Albania	−0.66	***	0.08	−0.91	***	0.15
Australia	0.12			−0.13		
Belgium	−0.41	***	0.04	−0.43	***	0.04
Brazil	−0.08			−0.14	*	
Britain	−0.17			−0.58	***	0.06
Bulgaria	−0.56	***	0.03	−0.82	***	0.03
Canada	−0.17	*	0.03	−0.55	***	0.03
Chile	−0.32	**	0.03	−0.16		
Czech	−0.59	***	0.05	−0.55	***	0.08
Denmark	−0.18	**	0.02	−0.40	***	0.05
Finland	−0.24	*	0.02	0.06		
France	−0.58	***	0.07	−0.39	***	0.06
Germany	−0.31	***	0.04	−0.50	***	0.09
Hungary	−0.17			−0.10		
Iceland	−0.31	***	0.04	−0.10		
Ireland	−0.05			−0.18		
Israel	−0.52	***	0.05	−0.52	***	0.08
Italy	−0.63	***	0.02	−0.59	***	0.04
Japan	−0.51	***	0.01	−0.07		
Korea	−0.38			−0.33	**	0.04
Mexico	−0.26	**	0.02	−0.21		
Netherlands	−0.31	**	0.03	−0.33	**	0.03
New Zealand	0.28	**	0.03	−0.09		
Norway	−0.22	**	0.03	−0.47	***	0.05
Peru	−0.36	***	0.03	−0.11		
Philippines	−0.43	***	0.05	−0.43	***	0.07
Poland	−0.95	***	0.03	−0.33	*	0.01
Portugal	−0.43	**	0.02	−0.05		
Romania	−0.18			−0.22		
Slovenia	−0.28			−0.73	***	0.04
Spain	−0.17			−0.23		
Sweden	−0.07			−0.03		
Switzerland	−0.39	***	0.05	−0.52		
Taiwan	−0.62	***	0.03	−0.25	***	0.02
United States	−0.02			0.05		

Variables included in the model but not shown: education, age, child in household, married, and employed. Note: Political persuasion missing in New Zealand.

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$ * $p < 0.10$.

elections are more inconsistent. Men give more positive assessments about elections in just three of six cases where there are significant differences. In Australia, New Zealand and France, women are more likely than men to believe that elections reflect their interests. These differences are also fairly substantial. In about half the sample, there is significant sex differentiation on attitudes about parties and leaders. In the United States, women are more likely than men to believe that leaders (who are men) reflect their views. In New Zealand, where the last two Prime Ministers have been women, men are still significantly more likely

⁸ Child in the household is missing in Australia and Chile and marital status is missing in Chile. These variables when missing have been set to the mean for the pooled sample.

Table 4
Sex differences in political attitudes by country

	Logit coefficients											
	Satisfaction			Elections			Party			Leader		
	Coef.		Prob.	Coef.		Prob.	Coef.		Prob.	Coef.		Prob.
Albania	0.25	*	0.06	0.05			−0.32	**	0.08	−0.25	*	0.06
Australia	0.18			0.33	***	0.08	−0.01			−0.06		
Belgium	−0.18	**	0.04	−0.25	***	0.06	N.A.			N.A.		
Brazil	−0.48	***	0.10	−0.02			−0.24	***	0.06	−0.18	**	0.04
Britain	−0.13			−0.02			−0.13			−0.12		
Bulgaria	−0.17			−0.12			−0.26	***	0.06	−0.03		
Canada	0.06			0.07			−0.50	***		−0.49	***	0.11
Chile	0.29	**	0.07	0.14			−0.09			0.11		
Czech	0.17			−0.13			0.00			−0.04		
Denmark	−0.17			0.07			−0.08			−0.06		
Finland	0.00			−0.07			−0.05			0.00		
France	−0.08			0.32	**	0.08	−0.29	**	0.07	−0.28	**	0.07
Germany	0.03			0.01			−0.18	*	0.04	0.06		
Hungary	−0.05			−0.06			0.07			−0.05		
Iceland	−0.01			−0.05			−0.19	*	0.04	−0.12		
Ireland	0.21	**	0.03	−0.18	**	0.04	−0.36	***	0.08	−0.27	***	0.06
Israel	−0.27	**	0.06	0.05			−0.14			−0.18		
Italy	−0.07			−0.18			−0.20	*	0.04	−0.09		
Japan	−0.16			−0.01			0.05			−0.24	**	0.06
Korea	−0.27	**	0.04	N.A.			−0.20			−0.26	*	0.04
Mexico	0.08			0.17			−0.06			0.14		
Netherlands	0.01			0.13			−0.20	*	0.04	N.A.		
New Zealand	0.05			0.35	***	0.09	−0.14			−0.19	*	0.04
Norway	0.09			N.A.			−0.33	***	0.05	−0.18	*	0.04
Peru	−0.24	**	0.05	−0.06			−0.13			−0.09		
Philippines	−0.17			0.06			−0.18			−0.31	**	0.06
Poland	−0.34	***	0.08	−0.12			−0.43	***	0.10	−0.55	***	0.12
Portugal	−0.26	**	0.07	−0.38	***	0.08	−0.11			−0.01		
Romania	−0.09			0.15			−0.11			−0.03		
Slovenia	−0.39	***	0.09	−0.16			−0.54	***	0.09	−0.65	***	0.12
Spain	−0.03			−0.09			−0.05			−0.14		
Sweden	−0.05			−0.17			−0.12			−0.14		
Switzerland	−0.06			−0.01			−0.66	***	0.11	−0.49	***	0.12
Taiwan	0.06			−0.16			−0.41	***	0.09	−0.31	***	0.07
United States	0.10			0.05			0.01			0.33	**	0.06

Variables included in the model but not shown: education, age, child in household, married, and employed.

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$ * $p < 0.10$.

than women to respond that there is a party leader that represents their views.

5. Pooled analysis

The descriptive representation thesis assumes that the sex differences observed above should be reduced when more women are represented in higher office. There are several explanations for why the visible presence of women in a national legislature may engage more women in the political process. Those who place an emphasis on the importance of descriptive representation claim that greater representation is not just symbolic but it also leads to policy consequences. As

discussed above, there are comparative studies that find women's representation to be important in influencing the agenda in parliaments as well as policy outcomes (see Bratton and Ray, 2002; O'Regan, 2000; Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler, 2005). The positive policy outcomes for women may foster a greater sense of efficacy and this engagement. The symbolic mobilization explanation suggests that the presence of women sends a cue that politics is an appropriate activity for women.

We hypothesize that sex differences in political engagement will be minimized when more women are elected to national office. To test this hypothesis, we use the proportion of women in the lower house of

Table 5
Effects of women's representation on political engagement

	Logit coefficients					
	Engage			Campaign		
	Coef.		Std. Err.	Coef.		Std. Err.
Female	−0.33	***	(0.10)	−0.34	***	(0.12)
Education	0.19	***	(0.03)	0.16	***	(0.03)
Age	0.00		(0.00)	0.00		(0.00)
Child in household	0.08	*	(0.05)	−0.01		(0.07)
Married	0.01		(0.04)	0.04		(0.06)
Employed	0.15	***	(0.06)	0.05		(0.06)
New democracy	−0.44	*	(0.26)	−0.23		(0.25)
Concurrent presidential election	0.56	**	(0.28)	0.72	***	(0.26)
Women in parliament	0.01		(0.01)	−0.01		(0.01)
Women in parliament × female	0.00		(0.00)	0.00		(0.00)
Constant 1	2.23		(0.42)	1.64		(0.39)
Constant 2	3.36		(0.43)	3.15		(0.40)
Constant 3	4.90		(0.44)			
Pseudo R^2	0.03			0.03		
Countries	35			34		
<i>n</i>	53,891			52,635		

Robust standard errors are in parentheses (clustered by country).

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.10$.

parliament (as given in Fig. 1). Our primary variable of interest is the cross-level interaction between the proportion of women in parliament and sex of the respondent. Several other contextual variables are included in the model as controls. We control for whether a country is a new or established democracy as political development is known to influence political engagement (Karp and Banducci, 2007) and assessments about the political process (Farrell and McAllister, 2006). Seven countries held presidential elections at the same time as legislative elections. Because concurrent presidential elections may serve to further mobilize the electorate, we have controlled for this factor. Fourteen countries in the sample are classified as new democracies.⁹ Given the multilevel structure of the data, most conventional methods of estimation will underestimate standard errors leading to a higher probability of rejection of a null hypothesis. Therefore, we proceed by estimating models using robust standard errors clustered by country. The procedure does not affect the coefficients, but it does estimate more consistent standard errors even when some of the assumptions about variance are violated. This means we can assume cases are independent across countries but not within.

Table 5 reports the results from our models of political engagement. The main effects of being female are

significant and in the expected direction. These results are consistent with earlier research that found women were less engaged in politics even after controlling for socio-economic status. Education is also positive and significant. However, we find little evidence that descriptive representation matters in terms of political engagement. The coefficient for the main effects of women in parliament is not significant, indicating that citizens in countries where more women are represented in parliament are no more engaged than those where women are poorly represented. Moreover, the interaction term is not significant indicating that the gap between men and women does not vary by women's representation.

While descriptive representation does not appear to have an influence on political engagement, the results in Table 6 provide evidence that descriptive representation is associated with more positive political attitudes. In two of the four models, the proportion of women in parliament is positive and significant. Citizens in countries with greater female representation are more likely to be satisfied with the way democracy works and more likely to believe that elections reflect the views of voters.¹⁰ The size of the effect is substantial. All other things being equal, moving from the fewest women in

⁹ These countries are Albania, Brazil, Bulgaria, Chile, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Korea, Mexico, the Philippines, Poland, Peru, Romania, Slovenia and Taiwan.

¹⁰ Assessments of government performance have a substantial impact on satisfaction with democracy indicating that the measure is not necessarily tapping diffuse attitudes toward the system. Nevertheless, the exclusion of this variable from the model does not affect the results.

Table 6
Effects of women's representation on political attitudes

	Logit coefficients							
	Satisfaction		Elections		Party		Leader	
	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.
Female	−0.07	(0.09)	0.04	(0.06)	−0.17 *	(0.10)	−0.19 **	(0.09)
Education	0.08 ***	(0.02)	0.07 ***	(0.02)	0.09 ***	(0.02)	0.06 **	(0.03)
Age	0.00	(0.00)	0.00	(0.00)	0.01 **	(0.01)	0.01 ***	(0.00)
Child in household	−0.09 *	(0.05)	0.00	(0.04)	−0.13 ***	(0.05)	−0.23 **	(0.09)
Married	0.06	(0.04)	0.05 *	(0.03)	0.20 ***	(0.04)	0.16 ***	(0.05)
Employed	0.07 *	(0.04)	−0.05	(0.04)	−0.08 *	(0.05)	0.06	(0.06)
New democracy	−1.01 ***	(0.25)	−0.41 **	(0.19)	−0.90 ***	(0.21)	−0.49 **	(0.23)
Concurrent presidential election	0.25	(0.25)	0.14	(0.24)	−0.11	(0.21)	0.43 *	(0.25)
Women in parliament	0.02 *	(0.01)	0.02 *	(0.01)	0.01	(0.01)	−0.01	(0.02)
Women in parliament × female	0.00	(0.00)	0.00	(0.00)	0.00	(0.00)	0.00	(0.00)
Constant 1	0.25	(0.42)	0.83	(0.36)	0.06	(0.34)	−0.06	(0.41)
Pseudo R^2	0.06		0.02		0.06		0.01	
Countries	35		33		34		35	
<i>n</i>	53,836		49,993		51,295		54,366	

Robust standard errors are in parentheses (clustered by country).

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.10$.

parliament to the most has the effect of increasing the probability of positive assessments about elections by close to 20 percent (from 0.38 to 0.57). These effects, however, are not conditional on the sex of the respondent. The interaction term fails to attain statistical significance in any of the models indicating that both men and women are likely to have more positive attitudes when more women are elected to parliament. Significant sex differentiation is only evident in the leadership model, indicating that women are less likely to feel that a leader reflects their views.

6. Discussion

The lack of women in political office has been the subject of much scholarly research. Advocates of increased women's representation cite many reasons for increasing descriptive representation. These reasons include more favourable policy outcomes and increased legitimacy of democratic institutions. As has been suggested in the literature on women's candidacies and representation in the U.S., the visibility of women in politics has important symbolic mobilization effects increasing the engagement of a group that has previously suffered a deficit in political activity. This increase in engagement also serves to bolster the legitimacy of democratic institutions. The comparative research presented here offers two important qualifications regarding the links between women's representation and women's political engagement: sex differentiation

while statistically significant across most countries tends to be small and the positive effect of women's descriptive representation on attitudes about the political process is not confined to female citizens.

Regarding the first qualification, the scholarship on sex differentiation in political behaviour has emphasized statistically significant differences between men and women on various measures of political engagement and attitudes. Although we find significant differences in a number of countries, the size of the gap is often modest. Our initial analysis examines sex differences in engagement across countries that remain after controlling for the usual social and structural explanations. We find that a negative and significant deficit for women is fairly consistent across countries with a few notable exceptions. The United States stands out as a counter example. While the representation of women is comparatively low, there are no significant differences between men and women in political engagement or attitudes except in one case where the gap is reversed. Furthermore, there are either negative or insignificant sex differences on assessments about whether leaders reflect the views of voters even when females hold leadership positions in parties that eventually lead the government such as in New Zealand and Germany.

Second, the research on women's candidacies and representation posits a link between lower levels of engagement among women to the lack of women in politics. Some have suggested that sex differences in political engagement can be reduced or even reversed when

more women gain political representation. We were unable to find any evidence to support this hypothesis. Sex differences are apparent in countries with both high and low levels of women in parliament. Cross-level interaction terms between sex and women's representation were also insignificant indicating that the sex differences are not dependent on the context of representation. These findings are analogous to Lawless (2004) who failed to find any evidence that the presence of women in Congress interacted with the sex of the respondent to influence political engagement, efficacy or trust. The inability to find any differential effect for women raises questions about the importance of symbolic representation for women. While a number of studies have found that descriptive representation matters for minorities, the same cannot be said for women. One possible explanation for the differences in findings between minorities and women is that gender does not usually represent a significant political cleavage, even though in contemporary politics women tend to be left leaning (Jelen et al., 1994).

While our analysis does not find any evidence that women are more likely than men to be mobilized by women's representation, we do find that the number of women in parliament is associated with more positive evaluations of the quality of the democratic process. Scholars that examine the link women's political engagement to a gendered political context suggest that the mechanism at work is either a role model or gender cue effect whereby the presence of women indicates that political activity is acceptable for women. This mechanism implies that the effect of the number of women will affect women only. However, we find that the effect of the number of women in parliament is significant for men and women, suggesting that the mechanism by which women's representation influences evaluations is one of more favourable policy outcomes benefiting both men and women.

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