

An Exploration of Female Political Representation: Evidence from an Experimental Web Survey

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Dear reader,

The following paper is an incomplete draft, as the project is currently pending IRB approval. I look forward to presenting the completed work at the conference on April 20th. If you would like a copy of the paper once it is complete, feel free contact me via email at mallory-treece@utc.edu.

Best,

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Introduction

The underrepresentation of women in political leadership positions has been a salient issue for some time; however, after the 2016 presidential election, more attention has been brought to this issue. Recent events such as the Women's March on Washington, the #MeToo Movement, and reactions to the Supreme Court confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh have made it clear that women in the United States do not feel properly represented. Just as in 1992, with a historic number of women running for political office, many are calling 2018 the Year of the Woman. Along with the increase in women running for office, we also saw an increase in racial minorities running for and winning seats. Women and African Americans are seeking greater representation, but what does that mean exactly? In this research, I address two types of political representation, substantive and descriptive, in order to gain clarity regarding which type of representation individuals prefer and how these preferences differ according to gender and race.

The question of political representation of women and African Americans in the United States has been widely explored especially regarding substantive and descriptive representation; however, the literature has not sufficiently addressed the question of citizens' preferences of these types of representation. In this paper, I explore the preferences of substantive and descriptive representation with special attention to how those attitudes vary when the gender and race of political representatives change. I plan to make the following contributions to the existing literature: First, not only does this work ask about substantive and descriptive representation but perceptions of female and African American political representatives more broadly. Secondly, using an experiment embedded in an online survey, I aim to find whether opinions on the different types of representation differ depending on the gender and race of the representative. Lastly, I address the behavioral aspects of substantive and descriptive representation as opposed

to the institutional aspects that have dominated the literature. Most studies have examined the effects of electing more females and African Americans to office; however, this study looks at citizens' attitudes toward those representing them and how they prefer to be represented.

Addressing the question of whether gender and race affect individual preferences regarding descriptive and substantive representation can have impacts on the way campaigns for female and African American candidates are run. If we understand the attitudes of those voting, it provides candidates with ways in which they can frame their campaigns. For example, if descriptive representation is valued over substantive representation, female and African American candidates can run campaigns that focus on how they stand for those groups of people. If the reverse is true, candidates would need to focus their campaigns on how they would pass legislation to help women and African Americans. It would also imply that the women being represented, for example, would be supportive of a male candidate who vows to pass female-centric legislation.

Literature Review

I argue that citizens' preferences of substantive and descriptive representation of women and African Americans differ; however, in order to understand why these two types of representation may hold different weight, one must have a clear understanding of what representation actually is, how these two types of representation contrast, and why they matter to the political representation of women and African Americans. The most basic definition of representation states that "in representation something not literally present is considered as present in a nonliteral sense" (Pitkin 1967, 9). While this definition provides the basis from which one can derive other conceptualizations of representation, it does not cover the full breadth and complexity of representation that this paper attempts to explore. For the purposes of

this paper, representation will be defined as a combination of the formalistic and accountability views of representation (Pitkin 1967): someone elected to a political office who has been authorized to create legislation by their constituents and who will be held accountable by those same constituents.

Delving deeper in to the complexity of representation, this paper looks specifically at descriptive and substantive representation. Descriptive representation is not to be confused with symbolic representation which refers to representatives “standing for” the people they represent (Pitkin 1967). It focuses on whether or not those in office representing the citizenry cause them to feel represented (Schwindt-Bayer & Mishler 2005). This differs from descriptive representation which has been studied widely and refers to representatives mirroring the public that they represent (Pitkin 1967). For example, if the population being represented is 51 percent female, 51 percent of the body representing that population would be female. For the purposes of this study, I focus on descriptive representation.

Substantive representation has been explored widely and refers to representatives “acting for” the people they represent (Pitkin 1967). This type of representation refers to what happens after a representative is elected to office. It asks the question do more women and African Americans in office translate into more legislation aimed at helping women and African Americans? For the purposes of this paper, substantive representation is defined as elected representatives passing legislation that is centered around women and/or African Americans, specifically.

Much of the representation literature that focuses on descriptive and substantive representation looks at institutional, rather than behavioral, aspects. The research focuses on what happens once women and African Americans are in office rather than the motivations of

the electorate that put them there. It tries to answer the question: do more women and African Americans in office translate into more legislation in favor of women and African Americans? While this question is vital to understanding the effects of electing more women and African Americans, another question, the one addressed in this paper, is just as vital and remains under researched.

Though much research focuses on what happens after female and African American representatives are elected, there is not a firm conclusion that descriptive representation translates into substantive representation (Mackay 2008). Women may not represent women because of partisan divides and institutional differences; however, it is argued that having more women in a legislature is valuable for other reasons. Having more women in office is just and can help a legislature gain legitimacy (Mackay 2008). Also, Lawless and Fox (2007) find that “women who replace men in congressional districts” are “more likely to focus on women’s issues” (p. 5). Although women and African Americans have increased their political representation in the United States overtime, they are far from having equal representation.

While Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler (2005) argue for an integrated model of representation, they, too, focus on institutional effects on representation, not on the opinions and behavior of the public. Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler (2005) argue that the model of representation should include the multitude of types of representation outlined by Pitkin (1967). While this is a valid argument, the goal of the present study is to discover if one type of representation is preferred over another; therefore, looking at these types of representation separately is necessary. Also, because their research is institutionally focused, it makes more sense for them to contend for an integrated model of representation.

Female representation is important because it “bears directly on issues of substantive and symbolic representation” (Lawless and Fox 2007, p. 5). There are many arguments addressing the question of why more women don’t run for political office. One argument is that women lack the political ambition to run for office (Lawless and Fox 2007). Further, Kanthak and Woon (2015) find that women tend to be election adverse, and this may be a contributing factor to the lack of female representation in the United States.

Some argue that there are also cultural barriers to getting more women elected to office. Norris and Inglehart (2001) address this argument by looking at these cultural barriers to women running and find that countries in which traditional views of women are held there are fewer women in the legislature. “The more egalitarian attitudes evident among younger generations in postindustrial societies, especially among younger women, suggest that we can expect to see continued progress in female representation in these societies,” therefore, there is an expected relationship between age and support for female candidates (p. 137).

There could also be a divide in terms of political knowledge. Sanbonmatsu (2003) explores the connection between political knowledge and support for electing more women to office finding that women tend to overestimate the number of women in office more than men and that “women would be even more supportive of electing more women to office if they were as knowledgeable as men about the extent of women's underrepresentation” (p. 367).

Some argue in favor of critical mass theory which states that “women are not likely to have a major impact on legislative outcomes until they grow from a few token individuals into a considerable minority of all legislators” (Childs and Krook 2008, p. 725).

One solution to the low number of female representatives that has been explored is enforcing gender quotas. Gender quotas have been successful in other countries, and they have been found to increase the number of female representatives (Tripp and Kang 2007). Although studies show that gender quotas increase female representation, there are two problems that arise in the American context: First, gender quotas are not likely to gain popularity and be passed by the legislature in the United States. Secondly, if descriptive representation does not translate into substantive representation, then the effects may not be what was intended if substantive representation is preferred over descriptive representation. While others find that gender quotas may have an impact on government spending (Clayton and Zetterberg 2018), this system is not yet applicable in the American context which is why the approach of this paper investigates the behavior of the citizenry that drives elections in the United States.

Just as prevalent as the issue of female underrepresentation is the underrepresentation of African Americans in the United States. The argument that women represent women ignores many social divisions including race (Mackay 2008, p. 127). Mansbridge (1999) investigates why women might need to represent women and African Americans represent African Americans by explaining that the concept of “de facto legitimacy” contends that when women and minorities see people who look like them in the legislature, they feel as though they have a seat at the table.

There are also differences in candidate preference and feelings of represented-ness when it comes to skin tone. Lerman, McCabe, and Sadin (2015) find that “black conservative Democrats, relative to their more liberal copartisans, express a stronger preference for black candidates relative to white counterparts and prefer darker-skinned candidates relative to lighter-skinned ones.”

Also, white and African Americans citizens value descriptive representation differently. Gay (2002) finds that “white constituents more favorably assess and are more likely to contact representatives with whom they racially identify” (p. 717). While this study investigates the value placed on descriptive representation, it does not explore substantive representation, and it does not differentiate between men and women. My approach will address these issues as well as look into the general receptiveness that the public has of female and African American representatives.

Theory

Previous literature has not done a sufficient job of addressing the behavioral aspects and preferences of descriptive and substantive representation. Much of the emphasis has been placed on the institutional effects on representation and how individuals are *actually* represented, as opposed to how citizens feel about how and by whom they are represented. Some research has found, however, that individuals view symbolic, descriptive, and substantive representation differently depending on their gender and race and the gender and race of representatives (Mansbridge 1999; Lerman, McCabe, and Sadin 2015).

Because individuals have been found to view representation differently on these grounds, I argue that attitudes toward substantive and descriptive representation will differ when looking at gender and race within the same study. Specifically, I expect individuals to place greater value on substantive representation. In this paper, I take what has been found previously regarding attitudes and feelings toward representation and add to it by looking into gender and race at once. I expect that because attitudes on representation differ depending on these variables, when presented with an image of a representative, individuals will respond differently in the preference they place on descriptive and substantive representation depending on whether or not the

representative presented looks like them and/or supports policies that help people who look like them.

The selection model of representation posits that in a principle-agent relationship, constituents will prefer to elect representatives who, according to their own exogenous motivations, hold policy preferences that align with theirs (Masbridge, 2009). This is in contrast to the sanction model that argues that representatives are motivated by their desire to be reelected and constituents hold them accountable for not supporting their policy preferences by voting them out of office. Because the selection model is more advantageous for the principle and the agent and improves trust in and legitimacy of the government (Mansbridge, 2009), it can be inferred that individuals will be more likely to value representatives whom they assume will hold the same policy preferences as their own. As such, individuals should value substantive representation based on party identification as an indicator because they can assume that these representatives will represent them without the work of punishing them if they do not support the same policies as the sanction model suggests.

In this study, I aim to test this theory. Through an experimental web survey, I will evaluate individuals' attitudes toward these types of representation. I argue that respondents will value substantive representation more than descriptive representation on the basis of the selection model of representation and because attitudes toward representatives have been empirically shown to differ according to gender and race.

I hypothesize that democratic women will value substantive representation over descriptive when presented with the picture of a female representative regardless of race (H1). I also hypothesize African American participants to value substantive representation over descriptive when presented with the picture of an African American representative (H2).

Methods

In this study, I use an experiment imbedded in an online survey to measure the value of descriptive and substantive representation using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). While MTurk is not as representative as "Internet-based panels or national probability samples," it is a more affordable alternative, and it is more "representative of the U.S. population than in-person convenience samples" (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012). In addition to the treatments, I ask all respondents a series of questions regarding demographics and political identification. I also ask questions measuring racism and attitudes toward female representatives.

In the survey experiment, I vary the gender and race of representatives and then measure attitudes about representation. To do this, I show pictures of fictional representatives who embody one of the following descriptions: a white male, an African American male, a white female, and an African American female. Each picture will also be accompanied by a description of the representative including their party identification. After showing a picture to the respondent, I ask questions about how they would want to be represented and if they feel effectively represented by the representative. As a baseline, some participants are asked the same questions without exposure to an image of a representative. Survey respondents are randomly assigned to receive one of the photos of a representative or no photo; however, all respondents will receive the same question wording regarding descriptive and substantive representation.

While the main focus of this study is on feelings of representation, there are also questions that measure attitudes toward female political representatives and racism more generally. These questions provide insight into how attitudes toward women and African Americans influence how individuals feel about how and by whom they are represented. Those

who exhibit racist opinions, for example, are expected to feel less represented by an African American representative.

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