



The Symbolic Value of Descriptive Representation: The Case of Female Representation

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Ph.D. thesis defence on 13 December 2011

Abstract

Most of the studies on political underrepresentation have tried to explain the factors that account for the underrepresentation of some groups in political power. The present research project focuses on the link between descriptive and symbolic representation and seeks to understand what consequences a more proportional political environment produces on the attitudes of both underrepresented and overrepresented groups towards the political system. Women remain among the least politically represented groups and therefore this project focuses on and analyses them in various political positions. Two dimensions of the relationship between citizens and politics are analysed: the *level of political engagement* and the *evaluation of the political system*. While there is a clear gender gap in the former, the same does not apply to the latter.

This dissertation reaches three important achievements. The first one is to develop the first theoretical framework of the potential causal mechanisms that are likely to operate behind the impact that female politicians have on both women and men. The second is to show that men can indeed be positively influenced; but mainly to clarify that the way they evaluate the political system is nearly the only way they are affected – their level of political engagement does not change. The third achievement is to show that, while most scholarship has been focusing on the topic *political involvement*, the presence of female politicians seems to be more connected to the way women *evaluate the political system*. This means that the ‘role model effect’ is not the main mechanism at work here. Instead, the idea that the presence of women is necessary to represent women’s interests and the fact that they are seen as bringing something new into the political world appear more influential factors.

Altogether the signs of the impact of the presence of female politicians are modest.



Jury: Fabrizio Bernardi (EUI), Joni Lovenduski (University of London, External Co-Supervisor), Mark Franklin (EUI, Supervisor), Mona Lena Krook (Washington University in St. Louis) (video-link).

Bio:

Ana Espírito-Santo holds a first degree in Sociology and a Master's degree in Political Science, both of these from the Higher Institute of Business and Labour Sciences in Lisbon (ISCTE). Prior to starting her PhD at the European University Institute in 2007, she has worked as a research assistant at the Social Sciences Institute (ICS) in Lisbon (2002-2005); as a guest junior researcher at the Social Science Research Centre Berlin (WZB; 2005-2006); and as a junior researcher at the Complutense University, Madrid (2007). Between January and March 2011, Ana has worked as a teaching assistant at the University of London, Birkbeck College. Since September 2011, Ana has been employed as invited assistant professor at ISCTE, Lisbon, where she teaches three courses in comparative politics. In March 2012, she will take up a postdoctoral research fellow position at the Social Sciences Institute (ICS) in Lisbon. Ana's research interests include gender and politics, the impact of electoral systems, and research methodology.