

The Politics of Presence

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Quotas for Women
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Abstract and Keywords

In recent decades, a significant number of political parties have taken steps to increase the representation of women in national assemblies, often by introducing gender quotas. The arguments for this fall into four categories: those that dwell on the role model that successful women politicians offer; those that appeal to principles of justice between the sexes; those that identify particular interests of women that would otherwise be overlooked; and those that see women as introducing new forms of political behaviour. The case for quotas depends on the idea that interests are gendered, but should not presume a unitary set of women's interests. The use of quotas raises new questions about the accountability of representatives to their constituents.

Keywords: accountability, essentialism, feminism, gender quotas, justice, political behaviour, political parties, role models, women's interests, women's representation

Though the overall statistics on women in politics continue to tell their dreary tale of underrepresentation, this underrepresentation is now widely regarded as a problem, and a significant number of political parties have adopted measures to raise the proportion of women elected. That the issue is even discussed marks a significant change. Even more remarkable is that growing support for a variety of *enabling* devices (day schools, for example, to encourage potential women candidates) now combines with some minority backing for measures that guarantee parity between women and men. Parties in the Nordic countries took the lead in this, introducing gender quotas for the selection of parliamentary candidates from the mid-1970s onwards, but a quick survey across the globe throws up a number of parallel developments.

When the African National Congress contested its first democratic election in South Africa, it operated a quota for women in selecting the candidates for seats. Recent developments in Indian local government have applied a quota system for people from scheduled castes (this is already practised in employment and education) to elected

positions at the village, block, and district level; the Panchayati Acts additionally require that one-third of the seats be reserved for women. Five years ago, the British Labour Party adopted a 50 per cent target for the number of women elected, to be achieved within three general elections. At its annual conference in 1993, it decided to establish all-women short lists for candidate selection in half the 'target' marginals and half the seats where sitting members will retire; since local parties have overall control of their (p. 58) selection process, it hoped to achieve this through amicable agreement. ¹

The bitter hostility such developments can arouse warns against easy optimism, but even the bitterness testifies to a sea-change in political attitudes. Positive action to increase the proportion of women elected is now on the political agenda. It has become one of the issues on which politicians disagree.

In some ways, indeed, this is an area in which those engaged in the practice of politics have edged ahead of those engaged in its theory. Gatherings of party politicians are significantly more likely to admit the problem of women's under-representation than gatherings of political scientists; for, while the former remain deeply divided over the particular measures they will support, most can manage at least a lukewarm expression of 'regret' that so few women are elected. The pressures of party competition weigh heavily on their shoulders. In an era of increased voter volatility, they cannot afford to disparage issues that competitors might turn to electoral advantage. Hence the cumulative effect noted in Norwegian politics, where the Socialist Left Party first adopted gender quotas in the 1970s, to be followed in the 1980s by similar initiatives from the Labour and Centre Parties, and by substantial increases in the number of women selected by the Conservative Party as well. ² Hence the impact of the German Green Party, which decided to alternate women and men on its list for the 1986 election; the threat of this small—but at the time rapidly growing—party contributed to the Christian Democrats' adoption of a voluntary quota, and to the Social Democrats' conversion to a formal one. ³ Hence the otherwise surprising consensus that has emerged among Britain's major political parties—at central office level if not yet in local constituencies—in favour of selecting a higher proportion of women candidates. ⁴ None of this would have (p. 59) happened without vigorous campaigning inside the political parties, but the campaigns have proved particularly effective where parties were already worried about their electoral appeal.

The results are not as yet striking, and outside the Nordic countries political élites continue to be resolutely male: a solid phalanx of dull-suited men, with only the occasional splash of female colour. A comparative survey from 1990 showed the proportion of women in legislative assemblies reaching 38 per cent in Sweden, 34.4 per cent in Norway, 33.5 per cent in Finland, 30.7 per cent in Denmark; then dropping to 21.3 per cent in the Netherlands, 15.4 per cent in Germany, 8.5 per cent

in Belgium, 6.3 per cent in the UK, and a mere 5.8 per cent in France. ⁵ Subsequent elections have brought further modification (the Netherlands has now reached Nordic proportions, while the UK figure jumped to over 9 per cent at the following general election), but the prospects for continuing improvement almost certainly depend on the willingness of political parties to make sex an additional criterion in choosing their candidates. Background changes in society have their effect, and the marked increase in women's labour market participation, combined with the equalization of educational qualifications between the sexes, is likely to feed through gradually into a greater number of women elected. But any more rapid improvement depends on deliberate choice. It is frequently noted that those countries that have adopted multi-member rather than single-member electoral constituencies offer more favourable conditions for women politicians, for when parties are choosing a slate of candidates it looks more obviously indefensible if all of these turn out to be men. ⁶ The most dramatic changes, however, have occurred where parties are pressured into positive action, setting a minimum target for the number of women elected, or, as in the common Nordic alternative, requiring a 40 per cent minimum for either sex.

Critics of gender parity ⁷ have tended to home in on what is really (p. 60) a second-order question. Taking it almost as given that the current underrepresentation of women in elected assemblies is a problem, they focus on what they perceive as the unacceptable solution of positive action. There is a surprising degree of consensus that women are underrepresented, and few critics have bothered to contest this point. More remarkably still, critics rarely dwell on the essentialist presumptions of 'a' women's perspective, or the dangerous potential for women politicians pressing only narrowly sectional concerns. It is as if there are just too many women for them to be considered as a unified or sectional group, and too obviously spread across every social dimension and every conceivable political persuasion. So, while concerns about social divisiveness and sectional narrowing are part of the standard fare in arguments against other forms of group-based representation, opponents of gender quotas are most likely to take their stand on a general critique of affirmative action, on the paucity of 'experienced' women, and the risk that the overall calibre of politicians will fall.

The argument then becomes a subset of more general debates, focusing on supposed tensions between selection by gender and selection by merit. Those opposed to gender quotas or other such affirmative actions typically insist on the dangers of abandoning meritocratic principles; and they warn the aspiring politicians of the derision that will pursue them if they reach their positions through their gender alone.

Quotas are patronising and self-defeating. Appointing or selecting women on grounds other than ability will rebound, not just on those individuals but on women generally. To say it is merely wiping out a disadvantage is disingenuous. Women will be making progress

by denying men an equal chance to compete. How can any woman politician claim to be taken seriously in such circumstances? An unfairness will have been replaced by a deliberate rigging of the rules. ⁸

The really reactionary mentality belongs to those who argue that women must be cosseted and promoted by virtue of their sex in a way that men are not. ⁹

(p. 61) Such arguments lend themselves to a series of empirical contestations, some of which have explored the availability of qualified women, while others query the startling presumption that existing incumbents were chosen on merit. (This last point is nicely summed up in a widely repeated comment that we'll know we have genuine equality when the country is run by incompetent women.) One of the points raised in the wider literature is that, even in the most seemingly meritocratic of systems—the selection of students for academic courses or the appointment of academics to university jobs—there is normally a cluster of vaguer characteristics which can override the stricter numerical hierarchy of grades or publications or degrees. ¹⁰ The implication is that selection by 'merit' and selection by ethnicity or gender are not such poles apart, for there is no process of admission or appointment that operates by a single quantifiable scale, and the numbers are always moderated by additional criteria. These more qualitative criteria ('personality', 'character', whether the candidates will 'fit in') often favour those who are most like the people conducting the interview: more starkly, they often favour the men. The point applies *a fortiori* to the process of selecting candidates for political office, where no one really knows what the qualifications should be.

A related point frequently raised in the general literature is that justifiable measures for remedying social disadvantage can come into conflict with what seem equally justifiable claims by individuals who would have got on the course or into the position if they had been around just ten years earlier. Such individuals then seem to be paying unfairly for something that was hardly their personal fault, and even those most committed to affirmative action will sometimes argue a moral case for compensating those who seem singled out to pay what should really be regarded as a social debt. ¹¹ Whatever conclusion we may reach on this, it is a problem that has less obvious application in the political realm. When Abigail Thernstrom wrote her indictment of what she saw as racial gerrymandering in the USA, she noted how extraordinary it was that, in an era marked by sharp challenges to affirmative action in the fields of education and employment, no one seemed particularly bothered by its equally (p. 62) extensive application in the field of political representation. ¹² The explanation for this lies in our very different relationship to electoral office, which we rarely conceive as a matter of individual rights. The most ardent defender of an individual's 'right' to a particular course or a particular position rarely talks of the individual's 'right' to be elected to parliament: outside the great political dynasties, few people think of political office in these terms.

These have been the issues most likely to arise in popular or media discussion, but from my perspective they remain mere skirmishing around the edges. The emphasis is entirely on the legitimacy of particular measures: how is one to justify quotas, guarantees, positive action, what its critics regard as 'reverse discrimination'? The arguments then parallel and reproduce those applied to the use of gender quotas in education or employment, with little sense of what makes political representation different from either of these. This elision obscures more fundamental issues of representation, and this is the first point I want to stress. The argument for gender parity in politics can proceed perfectly happily on the basis of correcting a previous injustice, but where this treats being an elected representative as much the same sort of thing as being a doctor or lawyer or engineer, it does not grapple adequately with what we mean by representation. It may be that this limitation is part of the appeal: that arguing for more women in politics as if this were simply an extension of more women in medicine or more women in law is what makes the case so effective. But what concerns me here is not so much the pragmatic choices over which kind of argument to employ. I want to address the theoretical basis of the arguments, and what they imply about representation.

I

Arguments for raising the proportion of women elected have fallen broadly into four groups. There are those that dwell on the role model successful women politicians offer; those that appeal to principles of justice between the sexes; those that identify particular interests of women that would be otherwise overlooked; and those that stress women's different relationship to politics and the way (p. 63) their presence will enhance the quality of political life. The least interesting of these, from my point of view, is the role model. When more women candidates are elected, their example is said to raise women's self-esteem, encourage others to follow in their footsteps, and dislodge deep-rooted assumptions about what is appropriate to women and men. I leave this to one side, for I see it as an argument that has no particular purchase on politics *per se*. Positive role models are certainly beneficial, but I want to address those arguments that engage more directly with democracy.

The most immediately compelling of the remaining arguments is that which presents gender parity as a straightforward matter of justice: that it is patently and grotesquely unfair for men to monopolize representation. If there were no obstacles operating to keep certain groups of people out of political life, we would expect positions of political influence to be randomly distributed between the sexes. There might be some minor and innocent deviations, but any more distorted distribution is evidence of intentional or structural discrimination. In such contexts (that is, most contexts) women are being

denied rights and opportunities that are currently available to men. There is a *prima facie* case for action.

There are two things to be said about this. One is that it relies on a strong position on the current sexual division of labour as inequitable and 'unnatural'. Consider the parallel underrepresentation of the very young and very old in politics. Most people will accept this as part of a normal and natural life-cycle, in which the young have no time for conventional politics, and the old have already contributed their share; and since each in principle has a chance in the middle years of life, this underrepresentation does not strike us as particularly unfair. The consequent 'exclusion' of certain views or experiences may be said to pose a problem; but, however much people worry about this, they rarely argue for proportionate representation for the over-70s and the under-25s.¹³ The situation of women looks more obviously unfair, in that women will be underrepresented throughout their entire lives, but anyone wedded to the current division of labour can treat it as a parallel case. A women's life-cycle typically includes a lengthy period of caring for children, (p. 64) and another lengthy period of caring for parents as they grow old. It is hardly surprising, then, that fewer women come forward as candidates, or that so few women are elected. Here, too, there may be an underrepresentation of particular experiences and concerns, but, since this arises quite 'naturally' from particular life-cycles, it is not at odds with equality or justice.

I do not find the parallel convincing, but my reasons lie in a feminist analysis of the sexual division of labour as 'unnatural' and unjust. The general argument from equal rights or opportunities translates into a specific case for gender parity in politics only when it is combined with some such analysis; failing this, it engages merely with the more overt forms of discrimination that exclude particular aspirants from political office. Justice requires us to eliminate discrimination (this is already implied in the notion of justice), but the argument for women's equal representation in politics depends on that further ingredient which establishes structural discrimination. Feminists will have no difficulty adding this, and the first point then reinforces the general argument already developed in Chapter 2. The case for the proportionate representation of women and men is not something we can deduce from an impossibly abstract equation of fair representation with proportional representation, as if each and every characteristic can be mapped out in the legislative assemblies. Nor is it automatically mandated by the discovery that there are fewer women in politics than men. Something else has to be added before we can move from a description of women's underrepresentation to an analysis of its injustice.

The second point is more intrinsically problematic, and relates to the status of representation as a political act. If we treat the underrepresentation of women in politics as akin to their underrepresentation in management or the professions, we

seem to treat being a politician as on a continuum with all those other careers that should be opened up equally to women. In each case, there is disturbing evidence of sexual inequality; in each case, there should be positive action for change. The argument appeals to our sense of justice, but it does so at the expense of an equally strong feeling that being a politician is not just another kind of job. 'Career politician' is still (and surely rightly) a term of abuse; however accurately it may describe people's activities in politics, it does not capture our political ideals. If political office *has* been reduced to yet another (p. 65) favourable and privileged position, then there is a clear argument from justice for making such office equally available to women. Most democrats, however, will want to resist pressures to regard political office in this way. So, while men have no 'right' to monopolize political office, there is something rather unsatisfying in basing women's claim to political equality on an equal right to an interesting job.

Reformulating the equal right to political office as an equal right to participate in politics makes it sound much better, but does not otherwise help. A rough equality in political participation has entered firmly enough into the understanding (if not yet the practice) of political equality for us to see an imbalance between the sexes as a legitimate cause for concern. Extending this, however, to the sphere of representation simply asserts what has to be established: that representation is just another aspect of participation, to be judged by identical criteria. The underrepresentation of women in elected assemblies is not simply analogous to their underrepresentation in the membership of political parties or the attendance at political meetings; for, while we can quite legitimately talk of an equal 'right' to political participation, we cannot so readily talk of an equal 'right' to be elected to political office. As has already been noted, the deduction from the one to the other lays itself open to irritated complaints of missing what is new about representation.

What we can more usefully do is turn the argument around, and ask by what 'natural' superiority of talent or experience men could claim a right to dominate assemblies? The burden of proof then shifts to the men, who would have to establish either some genetic distinction which makes them better at understanding problems and taking decisions, or some more socially derived advantage which enhances their political skills. Neither of these looks particularly persuasive; the first has never been successfully established, and the second is no justification if it depends on structures of discrimination. There is no argument from justice that can defend the current state of affairs; and in this more negative sense, there is an argument from justice for parity between women and men. The case then approximates that more general argument about symbolic representation, stressing the social significance that attaches to the composition of political élites, and the way that exclusion from these reinforces wider assumptions about the inferiority of particular groups. But (p. 66) there is a troubling sense in which this still overlooks what is peculiar to representation as a political act. When democracy has been widely

understood as a matter of representing particular policies or programmes or ideas, this leaves a question mark over why the sex of the representatives should matter.

II

An alternative way of arguing for gender parity is in terms of the interests that would be otherwise discounted. This is an argument from political realism. In the heterogeneous societies contained by the modern nation-state, there is no transparently obvious 'public interest', but rather a multiplicity of different and potentially conflicting interests which must be acknowledged and held in check. Our political representatives are only human, and as such they cannot pretend to any greater generosity of spirit than those who elected them to office. There may be altruists among them, but it would be unwise to rely on this in framing our constitutional arrangements. Failing Plato's solution to the intrusion of private interest (a class of Guardians with no property or family of their own), we must look to other ways of limiting tyrannical tendencies, and most of these will involve giving all interests their legitimate voice.

This, in essence, was James Mill's case for representative government and an extended franchise, though he notoriously combined this with the argument that women could 'be struck off without inconvenience' from the list of potential claimants, because they had no interests not already included in those of their fathers or husbands. (He also thought we could strike off 'young' men under forty years of age.) Part of the argument for increasing women's political representation is a feminist rewrite and extension of this. Women occupy a distinct position within society: they are typically concentrated, for example, in lower paid jobs; and they carry the primary responsibility for the unpaid work of caring for others. There are particular needs, interests, and concerns that arise from women's experience, and these will be inadequately addressed in a politics that is dominated by men. Equal rights to a vote have not proved strong enough to deal with this problem; there must also be equality among those elected to office.

One point made by Will Kymlicka is that this argument may not (p. 67) be enough to justify parity of presence. In a recent discussion of demands for group representation in Canada, he makes a useful distinction between arguments for equal or proportionate presence (where the number of women or Aboriginal peoples or francophone Canadians in any legislative assembly would correspond to their proportion in the citizenry as a whole), and the case for a threshold presence (where the numbers would reach the requisite level that ensured each group's concerns were adequately addressed).¹⁴ When the group in question is a numerically small minority, the threshold might prove larger than their proportion in the population as a whole; when the group composes half the population, the threshold might be considerably lower. On this basis, there could be an argument for greater than proportionate representation of Aboriginal peoples, for

example, but less than proportionate representation of women—not that women would be formally restricted to 25 percent or 30 per cent of the seats, but that they might not require any more than this in order to change the political agenda. It is the argument from justice that most readily translates into strict notions of equality; the argument from women's interests need not deliver such strong results.

The above is a qualification rather than a counter#argument, and in principle it still confirms the legitimacy of political presence. A potentially more damaging argument comes from those who query whether women do have a distinct and separate interest, and whether 'women' is a sufficiently unified category to generate an interest of its own. If women's interests differed systematically from men's (or if women always thought differently on political issues), then the disproportionate number of men in politics would seem self#evidently wrong. The concerns of one group would get minimal consideration; the concerns of another would have excessive weight. But where is the evidence for this claim? Does not the notion of a distinct 'women's interest' just dissolve upon closer attention?

The idea that women have at least some interests distinct from and even in conflict with men's is, I think, relatively straightforward. Women have distinct interests in relation to child#bearing (for any foreseeable future, an exclusively female affair); and as society is currently constituted they also have particular interests arising from (p. 68) their exposure to sexual harassment and violence, their unequal position in the division of paid and unpaid labour, and their exclusion from most arenas of economic or political power. ¹⁵ But all this may still be said to fall short of establishing a set of interests shared by all women. If interests are understood in terms of what women express as their priorities and goals, there is considerable disagreement among women; and, while attitude surveys frequently expose a 'gender gap' between women and men, the more striking development over recent decades has been the convergence in the voting behaviour of women and men. There may be more mileage in notions of a distinct woman's interest if this is understood in terms of some underlying but as yet unnoticed 'reality', but this edges uncomfortably close to notions of 'false consciousness', which most feminists would prefer to avoid. Indeed, the presumption of a clearly demarcated woman's interest which holds true for all women in all classes and all countries has been one of the casualties of recent feminist critique, and the exposure of multiple differences between women has undermined more global understandings of women's interests, and concerns. ¹⁶ If there is no clearly agreed woman's interest, can this really figure as a basis for more women in politics?

There are two things to be said about this. The first is that the variety of women's interests does not refute the claim that interests are gendered. That some women do not bear children does not make pregnancy a gender#neutral event; that women

disagree so profoundly on abortion does not make its legal availability a matter of equal concern to both women and men; that women occupy such different positions in the occupational hierarchy does not mean they have the same interests as men in their class. The argument from interest does not depend on establishing a unified interest of all women: it depends, rather, on establishing a difference between the interests of women and men.

Some of the interests of women will, of course, overlap with the (p. 69) interests of certain groups of men. The fact that women are more likely to depend on public transport, for example, forges a potential alliance with those men who have campaigned for better public transport on social or environmental grounds; and the fact that women are more likely to press the interests of children does not mean that no man would share their concerns. In these instances, it may be said that the election of more female representatives will introduce a new range of issues—but that many of these will be ones that some men will be happy to endorse. In other instances, the differences are more inherently conflictual. Women's claim to equal pay must, logically, imply a relative worsening of male earnings; and outside extraordinary growth conditions, women's claim to equal employment opportunities must reduce some of the openings currently available to men. Women have no monopoly on generosity of spirit, and even in these more conflictual situations they can expect to find a few powerful allies among the men. What they cannot really expect is the degree of vigorous advocacy that people bring to their own concerns.

The second point is more complex, and arises with particular pertinence when a history of political exclusion has made it hard even to articulate group concerns. When Hanna Pitkin explored Edmund Burke's rather odd understanding of representation, she noted that he conceived of interests as a matter of 'objective, impersonal, unattached reality';¹⁷ this then became the basis on which he argued for 'virtual' representation, by people not even chosen by the interested group. Burke certainly thought that all major interests should be duly represented, but the very objectivity of the interests allowed for their representation by people who did not immediately share them. The more fixed the interests, the more definite and easily defined, the less significance seemed to attach to who does the work of representation. So if women's interests had a more objective quality (and were transparently obvious to any intelligent observer) there might be no particular case—beyond what I have already argued about vigorous advocacy—for insisting on representatives who also happen to be women. We might feel that men would be less diligent in pressing women's interests and concerns, that their declared 'sympathy' would always be suspect. But if we all knew what these (p. 70) interests were, it would be correspondingly easy to tell whether or not they were being adequately pursued.

Interest would then more obviously parallel political ideas or beliefs. It would become something we could detach from particular experience, as we already detach the 'interest' of pensioners, or children, or the long-term unemployed. Each of these (perhaps particularly the example of children) is problematic, but in each of them we can more legitimately claim to know what is in a group's interest. Attention then shifts to more traditional ways of strengthening the weight attached to the interests, perhaps through writing them into party programmes or party commitments. The alternative emphasis on changing the composition of decision-making assemblies is particularly compelling where interests are not so precisely delineated, where the political agenda has been constructed without reference to certain areas of concern, and where much fresh thinking is necessary to work out what best to do. In such contexts there is little to turn to other than the people who carry the interests, and who does the representation then comes to be of equal significance with what political parties they represent.

This argument echoes what was a widely shared experience in the early years of contemporary feminism. The now derided emphasis on consciousness-raising groups offered more than a luxury occasion for some women to get together and moan: the sharing of experience was part of a process in which women freed themselves from a cycle of passivity and self-denial, stretched their sense of what was possible and desirable, and reached different conclusions about what they might want. Those involved in this experience frequently talked of their difficulties in finding a voice, the way that dominant definitions of politics blocked out alternatives, or hegemonic culture controlled what could or could not be said. The emphasis then shifted from an objectively defined set of interests (which just needed more vigorous pursuit) to a more exploratory notion of possibilities so far silenced and ideas one had to struggle to express. And in this later understanding of the processes that generate needs and concerns and ideas, it was far harder to sustain the primacy of ideas over political presence. If the field of politics has already been clearly demarcated, containing within it a comprehensive range of ideas and interests and concerns, it might not so much matter who does the work of representation. But if the range of ideas has been curtailed (p. 71) by orthodoxies that rendered alternatives invisible, there will be no satisfactory solution short of changing the people who represent and develop the ideas.

The more decisive problem with the argument from interests lies in the conditions for accountability to the interested group. Does the election of more women ensure their representation? At an intuitive level, an increase in the number of women elected seems likely to change both the practices and priorities of politics, increasing the attention given to matters of child care, for example, or ensuring that women's poor position in the labour market is more vigorously addressed. This intuition is already partially confirmed by the experience of those countries that have changed the gender composition of their elected assemblies. But what does this mean in terms of political

representation? Elections are typically organized by geographical constituencies, which sometimes coincide with concentrations of particular ethnic or religious groups, or concentrations of certain social classes, but which never coincide with concentrations of women or men. Elections typically take place through the medium of political parties, each of which produces candidates who are said to represent that party's policies and programmes and goals. In what sense can we say that the women elected through this process carry an additional responsibility to represent women? In the absence of mechanisms to establish accountability, the equation of more women with more adequate representation of women's interests looks suspiciously undemocratic. If the interests of women are varied, or not yet fully formed, how do the women elected know what the women who elected them want? By what right do they claim their responsibility to represent women's concerns? The asymmetry between noting a problem of exclusion and identifying the difference that inclusion brings about is particularly pointed here. However plausible it is to say that male-dominated assemblies will not adequately address the needs and interests of women, it cannot be claimed with equal confidence that a more balanced legislature will fill this gap.

III

The third way of formulating the case for gender parity approaches it from almost the opposite direction. It sees the inclusion of women (p. 72) as challenging the dominance of interest group politics, and expects women politicians to introduce a different set of values and concerns. This is something that has had a long history in feminist thinking; for, while women have repeatedly complained that their interests were being ignored by the men, the very same women have often presented their sex as the one that disdains interest and transcends the limits of faction. In the campaign for women's suffrage, for example, it was often suggested that women would bring a more generous morality to the political field; in the recent development of ecofeminism, it is often argued that women have a deeper, because transgenerational, relationship to the needs of the environment.

In some formulations of this, feminists have made a strong distinction between interest and need, arguing that the emphasis on interests treats politics as a matter of brokerage between different groups, and that the equation of politics with the rational calculation of interests is at odds with women's own understanding of their needs and goals.¹⁸ As Irene Diamond and Nancy Hartsock put it, '[t]he reduction of all human emotions to interests, and interests to the rational search for gain reduces the human community to an instrumental, arbitrary, and deeply unstable alliance, one which rests on the private desires of isolated individuals.'¹⁹ Need, by contrast, is thought to appeal to a more basic and common humanity; instead of asserting a stake in political battle, it formulates claims in more obviously moral terms.

This distinction engages directly with that common objection to a politics of presence which views it as increasing the role of interest in politics. When the demand for more women in politics is formulated in terms of interest, this seems to accept a version of politics as a matter of competition between interest groups; it talks the language of defence or protection, and treats politics as a zero-sum game. But when the demand is formulated in terms of need, this potentially raises things to a higher plain. The substitution of needs talk for interests talk may then offer a more radical challenge to the practices (p. 73) of contemporary democracy, querying the very nature of the game as well as the composition of the players.

My own position on this is somewhat agnostic. Interest can sound rather grasping and competitive, but it does at least serve to remind us that there may be conflicts between different groups. Need has more obvious moral resonance, but it originates from a paternalist discourse which lends itself more readily to decisions by experts on behalf of the needy group. ²⁰ My own rather commonsensical solution is to use both terms together. Note, however, that the opposition between need and interest does not substantially alter what is at issue in demands for more women in politics, for need is as contested as interest, and either requires a greater female presence. As Nancy Fraser has argued, the interpretation of needs is itself a matter of political struggle, spanning three crucial moments: the struggle to establish (or deny) the political status of a given need; the struggle for the power to define and interpret the need; and the struggle to secure its satisfaction. ²¹ At each moment it matters immensely who can claim the authoritative interpretation; and, while much of the battle for this rages across the full terrain of civil society, groups excluded from state agencies or legislative assemblies will have significantly less chance of establishing their own preferred version. Neither needs nor interests can be conceived as transparently obvious, and any fair interpretation of either then implies the presence of the relevant group.

The broader claim made by those who disdain the politics of interest is that increasing the proportion of women elected introduces new kinds of behaviour and values. It is often suggested, for example, that women will be less competitive, more co-operative, more prepared to listen to others; that women bring with them a different, and more generous, scale of values; that women raise the moral tenor of politics. These arguments are always associated with women's role as caring for others, and often more specifically with (p. 74) their role as mothers. Jean Bethke Elshtain, for example, presents a stark picture of contemporary politics as dominated by the most crass individualism and expressed in the most impersonal of languages: a world that begins and ends 'with mobilization of resources, achieving maximum impacts, calculating prudentially, articulating interest group claims, engaging in reward distribution functions'. ²² The relationship between mother and child then appears as a paradigm for a less interest-regarding set of values. Mothers cannot put their own interests first, for they can never

forget the vulnerability of the human child. The politics that develops out of this cannot accept the conventional separation of politics from morality, and it offers the most profound and hopeful challenge to the sordid instrumentalism of the modern world. ²³

Elshtain is only moderately (if at all) concerned with measures that might increase the proportion of women elected, for much of her critique of the current relationship between public and private revolves around an analysis of that world of 'formal' male power which has absorbed more and more spheres of social life into its orbit. She sees little to gain in the absorption of women into the same circuit. But her broadly 'maternal feminism' ²⁴ finds many echoes in current explorations of women's role in politics, perhaps most notably in the Nordic tradition which sees women as bearers of a new 'politics of care'. Feminists have challenged the 'misplaced analogy to the marketplace' ²⁵ which is said to weaken both the theory and practice of politics; they have elaborated alternative theories of power which stress power as energy or capacity rather than dominance; and they have suggested that we try out what society would look like if we conceive it from the perspective of mothering rather than that of 'economic man'. ²⁶ Running through all such arguments (p. 75) is a consistent contrast between women and the politics of self-interest. The kind of changes we can anticipate from women's increased political presence are seen as relating to this.

My problem with such arguments is not that they presume a difference between men and women. As Catherine MacKinnon puts it in a nicely pointed question, 'I mean, can you imagine elevating one half of a population and denigrating the other half and producing a population in which everyone is the same?' ²⁷ We do not have to resort to either mysticism or sociobiology to explain social differences between women and men, and it would be most peculiar if the different responsibilities the sexes carry for caring for others did not translate into different approaches to politics and power. These initial differences may be far outweighed by the common experiences men and women will later share in making their way through political life. I incline to the view that politics is more formative than sex, and that the contrast between those who get involved in politics and those who do not is deeper than any gender difference between those who are elected. But this remains at a more speculative level. The real problem with basing the case for more women in politics on their supposed superiority over men is that this loads too much on women's role as mothers.

As Mary Dietz, in particular, has argued, ²⁸ the characteristics that make a good mother are not necessarily those that make a good citizen, and the generous care women may give to their dependent children is hardly a paradigm for a democratic politics that should be based on equality and mutual respect. Nor is it particularly useful to present women as better or more moral than men. 'Such a premise would posit as a starting point precisely what a democratic attitude must deny—that one group of citizens' voices

is generally better, more deserving of attention, more worthy of emulation, more moral, than another's. A feminist democrat cannot give way to this sort of temptation, lest democracy itself lose its meaning, and citizenship its special name.' ²⁹

(p. 76) Which is not to say that women will not, or should not, make a difference. In a recent study of Norwegian MPs, Hege Skjeie uncovered a remarkable consensus across the parties and between the sexes that gender does and should make a difference, with a clear majority thinking that gender affects priorities and interests, and that women represent a new 'politics of care'. Translated into areas of policy initiative, this generated a rather predictable list: politicians of both sexes saw women as particularly concerned with policies on welfare, the environment, equality, education, and disarmament, and men as more interested in the economy, industry, energy, national security, and foreign affairs. (Transport was the only area regarded as equally 'male' and 'female— not because transport is intrinsically more gender#neutral, but because it has become important, for different reasons, to both women and men.) Against the background of a strong Norwegian tradition of social representation, which has long assumed that political representatives should 'mirror' differences between town and country and balance territorial concerns, ³⁰ it has been seen as perfectly legitimate and desirable that women politicians should represent different concerns. Indeed, '[a] mandate of "difference" is now attached to women politicians . . . Women have entered politics on a collective mandate, and their performance is judged collectively.' ³¹

The precise implications of this remain, however, ambiguous. The widely presumed association between women and a politics of care leaves it open whether women will concentrate on policies to enhance child care provision, thereby to increase women's participation in the labour market, or on policies that will raise the value and prestige of the care work that women do in the home. What resolves this in the Norwegian context is not so much gender as party. Women associated with parties on the left of the political spectrum are more likely to interpret a politics of care in terms of the first set of priorities, while women associated with parties on the right will tend to the second interpretation. In this as in other policy areas, party loyalties are usually decisive, and, though Skjeie notes a number of cases of women forming cross#party alliances on particular (p. 77) issues, she finds little evidence of women refusing the ultimate priorities of their parties. 'The belief in women's difference could still turn into a mere litany on the importance of difference. Repeated often enough, the statement that "gender matters" may in turn convince the participants that change can in fact be achieved by no other contribution than the mere presence of women.' ³²

IV

This leads directly into the key area of contention, already signalled in my discussion of interest. Either gender does make a difference, in which case it is in tension with accountability through political parties, or it does not make a difference, in which case it can look a rather opportunistic way of enhancing the career prospects of women politicians. Aside from the symbolic importance of political inclusion, and women's equal right to have their chance at a political career (a fair enough argument, but not intrinsically about democracy), we can only believe that the sex of the representatives matters if we think it will change what the representatives do. Yet in saying this, we seem to be undermining accountability through party programmes. We are saying we expect our representatives to do more—or other—than they promised in the election campaign. If we are either surprised or disappointed, for example, by the limited capacity to act on a cross-party basis, this must be because we see an increase in the number of women politicians as challenging the dominance of the party system, or the tradition of voting along party lines. Those who have felt that tight controls of party discipline have worked to discourage serious discussion and debate may be happy enough with this conclusion. But in the absence of alternative mechanisms of consultation or accountability, it does read like a recipe for letting representatives do what *they* choose to do.

Though it is rarely stated in the literature, the argument from women's interests or needs or difference implies that representatives will have considerable autonomy; that they do have currently; and, by implication, that this ought to continue. Women's exclusion from politics is said to matter precisely because politicians do not abide by pre-agreed policies and goals—and feminists have much experience (p. 78) of this, gained through painful years of watching hard-won commitments to sexual equality drop off the final agenda. When there is a significant underrepresentation of women at the point of final decision, this can and does have serious consequences, and it is partly in reflection on this that many have shifted attention from the details of policy commitments to the composition of the decision-making group. Past experience tells us that all male or mostly male assemblies have limited capacity for articulating either the interests or needs of women, and that trying to tie them down to pre-agreed programmes has had only limited effect. There is a strong dose of political realism here. Representatives *do* have autonomy, which is why it matters who those representatives are.

This is a fair enough comment on politics as currently practised, and shifting the gender balance of legislatures then seems a sensible enough strategy for the enfeebled democracies of the present day. But one might still ask whether representatives *should* have such autonomy, and whether it would change the importance attached to gender

composition if the politicians were more carefully bound by their party's commitments and goals. Consider, in this context, the guidelines that were introduced by the US Democrats in the early 1970s, to make their National Convention (which carries the crucial responsibility of deciding on the presidential candidate) more representative of the party rank and file. Dismay at the seemingly undemocratic nature of the 1968 Convention prompted the formation of a Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection, which recommended more extensive participation by party members in the selection of delegates, as well as quota guidelines to increase the proportion of delegates who were female, black, and young. As a result of this, the composition of the 1972 Convention was markedly more 'descriptive' of party members than previous ones had been: 40 per cent of the delegates were women, 15 per cent were black, and 21 per cent were aged 18–30. ³³ But the reforms pointed in potentially contradictory directions, for they simultaneously sought to increase rank-and-file participation in the selection of delegates, to bind (p. 79) delegates more tightly to the preferences of this rank and file, and to ensure a more descriptive representation according to age, gender, and race. As Austin Ranney (one of the members of the Commission) later noted, the success of the first two initiatives undermined the importance of the third. By 1980 the overwhelming majority of delegates were being chosen in party primaries which bound them to cast their votes for one particular candidate; they became in consequence mere ciphers, who were there to register preferences already expressed. 'If that is the case,' Ranney argues, 'then it really doesn't matter very much who the delegates are.' ³⁴ The more radical the emphasis on accountability, the less significance attaches to who does the work of representation.

Bob Goodin offers one way out of this impasse, which stresses the importance of symbolic representation and the way this relates to people's self-images in politics. ³⁵ Empirical studies of the 1972 National Convention suggest that increasing the proportion of female and black delegates had minimal impact on the kinds of views represented at the convention, and that neither sex nor race made much of a difference. But such investigations may miss the point, which is that 'people's self-images are, at least in part, tied up with politics'. ³⁶ If the pattern of representation gives no recognition to the communal attachments through which people live their lives, then this is felt to be intolerable, even when changing that pattern of representation has no discernible impact on the kinds of policies adopted. Politics is not just about self-interest, but also about self-image: '[b]e they manifestations of silly sentimentality or not, symbolic appeals have a powerful political pull which social scientists cannot ignore.' ³⁷

Goodin's argument captures much of the popular impetus towards gender parity, for people do recoil from the representation of themselves by such an 'unrepresentative' sample, and do feel that changing this matters even if it subsequently proves to make no

further difference. One of the principles associated with legal judgements is that justice must not only be done but be seen to be done. (p. 80) By the same token, we might well say that representatives must not only be representative but also be seen to be so. It would be foolish to underplay this element, but it would also be misleading to consider it the only thing at issue in demands for political presence. Women *do* think that it will—or should—make a difference when more women are elected as representatives, and this conviction is equally strong in the arguments I address in the following chapter over the representation of minority Americans. Where this is so, it conflicts with alternative strategies for keeping representatives accountable.

This points to a significant area of divergence between current feminist preoccupations and what has long been the main thrust in radical democracy. Radical democrats distrust the wayward autonomy of politicians and the way they concentrate power around them, and they typically work to combat these tendencies by measures that will bind politicians more tightly to their promises, and disperse over#centralized power. Feminists have usually joined forces in support of the second objective: feminism is widely associated with bringing politics closer to home; and women are often intensely involved in local and community affairs. But when feminists insist that the sex of the representatives matters, they are expressing a deeper ambivalence towards the first objective. The politics of binding mandates turns the representatives into glorified messengers: it puts all the emphasis on to the content of the messages, and makes it irrelevant who the messengers are. In contesting the sex of the representatives, feminists are querying this version of democratic accountability.

What makes sense of this are the arguments developed in Chapter 2 about the limits of a system of representation that is premised on packages of supposedly congruent beliefs, combined with arguments that will be developed in Chapter 6 on the role of deliberation in politics. Much more can (and in my view should) be done to keep representatives accountable to the programmes on which they were elected to office, and to bind them more closely to what they professed as their political beliefs. But there is no combination of reforms that can deliver express and prior commitments on every issue that will come to matter, and it is in those spaces where we have to rely on representatives exercising their own judgement that it can most matter who the representatives are. Behind the deceptive (p. 81) simplicity of the arguments for gender parity is this alternative—and more contested—understanding of representation.

The first part of the argument for gender parity in politics derives from principles of justice, and its power is essentially negative: by what possible superiority of talent or experience could men claim a 'right' to monopolize assemblies? There is no convincing answer to this ultimately rhetorical question, and on this more limited ground of equal access to elected office it is easy enough to establish the case. There are all kinds of

second-order questions, relating to how legitimate objectives can be best achieved; and all kinds of pragmatic judgements to be made on specific proposals, none of which flows directly from conclusions on overall objectives. But the real problem with the argument from justice is that it remains a subset of more general arguments for equal opportunities and affirmative action, and as such it gives too little weight to the difference between being a representative and being a lawyer or professor. It may be said that changing the composition of elected assemblies plays a particularly important symbolic role, that it involves a more powerful and visible assertion of women's equality with men than changing the composition of management or the professions. But this still confines it to the realm of symbolic representation, without any clear implications as to what further difference this representation should make.

The argument from either interests or needs, by contrast, anticipates a difference in the kinds of policy decision that will be made, and this more directly challenges existing conditions of representation and accountability. Representation as currently practised rests on what most of the practitioners will admit is pretence: a pretence that the choices offered to the electorate exhaust the full range of possible alternatives; a pretence that party manifestos and programmes wrap up coherent packages of interests and beliefs; a pretence that government is just a matter of implementing the choices the electorate has made. The pretence cedes tremendous power to those individuals who are eventually elected. (Indeed, in the British system of government, which enforces tight voting discipline on backbench MPs, this power is even further concentrated among those who hold ministerial office.) The power of the representatives is not, of course unlimited; if nothing else, they have to tread in wary judgement of how much the electorate will swallow, and in contemporary mass democracies they pay close attention to the messages that arrive (p. 82) daily through opinion polls. But opinion polls register opinion on what is already on the political agenda, and have never proved a particularly effective way of introducing new possibilities and concerns. They cannot give a significant voice to those groups that have been excluded from arenas of power.

Changing the gender composition of elected assemblies is a major, and necessary, challenge to the social arrangements which have systematically placed women in a subordinate position; and whether we conceive of politics as the representation of interest or need (or both), a closer approximation to gender parity is one minimal condition for transforming the political agenda. But changing the gender composition cannot guarantee that women's needs or interests will then be addressed. The only secure guarantees would be those grounded in an essential identity of women, or those arrived at through mechanisms of accountability to women organized as a separate group. The first has neither empirical nor theoretical plausibility; the second is impossible under current electoral arrangements, and perhaps unlikely in any event. So the case for gender parity among our political representatives inevitably operates in

a framework of probabilities rather than certainties. It is possible—if highly unlikely—that assemblies composed equally of women and men will behave just like assemblies in which women have a token presence; it is possible—and perhaps very likely—that they will address the interests of certain groups of women while ignoring the claims of others. The proposed change cannot bring with it a certificate of interests addressed or even a guarantee of good intent. In this, as in all areas of politics, there are no definitive guarantees.

Although the importance I have attached to the gender of the representatives conflicts with much of what Hanna Pitkin has argued about the limits of mirror representation, it should be clear from this chapter that I am very much at one with her in seeing representation as a process. Fair representation is not something that can be achieved in one moment, nor is it something that can be guaranteed in advance. Representation depends on the continuing relationship between representatives and the represented, and anyone concerned about the exclusion of women's voices or needs or interests would be ill-advised to shut up shop as soon as half those elected are women. This is already well understood in relation to the politics of ideas; for getting one's preferred party elected to government is usually seen as (p. 83) the beginning rather than the end of the process, and only the most sanguine of voters regards this as settling future policy direction. The warning is even more pointed in relation to the politics of presence, for the shared experience of women as women can only ever figure as a *promise* of shared concerns, and there is no obvious way of establishing strict accountability to women as a group. Changing the gender composition of elected assemblies is largely an enabling condition (a crucially important one, considering what is *disabled* at present) but it cannot present itself as a guarantee. It is, in some sense, a shot in the dark: far more likely to reach its target than when those shooting are predominantly male, but still open to all kinds of accident. (p. 84)

Notes:

(1) This device reflects the constraints of the British electoral system, which operates with single-member constituencies and first-past-the-post election, and is not then amenable to the more normal quota procedures.

(2) H. Skjeie, 'The Rhetoric of Difference: On Women's Inclusion into Political Elites', *Politics and Society*, 19/2 (1991).

(3) J. Chapman, *Politics, Feminism, and the Reformation of Gender* (London, 1993), ch. 9.

(4) J. Lovenduski and P. Norris, 'Selecting Women Candidates: Obstacles to the Feminisation of the House of Commons', *European Journal of Political Research*, 17 (1989).

(5) S. McRae, 'Women at the Top: The Case of British National Politics', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 43/3 (1990).

(6) P. Norris, 'Women's Legislative Participation in Western Europe', in S. Bashevkin (ed.), *Women and Politics in Western Europe* (London, 1985).

(7) I use the term 'parity' to indicate a rough equality between the proportion of women and men elected. My use of this term should not be confused with the arguments that have recently surfaced within the Council of Europe for so-called parity democracy. See J. Outshoorn, 'Parity Democracy: A Critical Look at a "New" Strategy', paper prepared for workshop on 'Citizenship and Plurality', European Consortium for Political Research, Leiden, 1993.

(8) M. Phillips, 'Hello to the Gender Gerrymander', *Observer* (3 October 1993).

(9) Editorial, *London Evening Standard* (24 June 1993).

(10) See P. Green, *The Pursuit of Inequality* (New York, 1981), especially ch. 6.

(11) This argument is comprehensively discussed in G. Ezorsky, *Racism and Justice: The Case for Affirmative Action* (Ithaca, NY, 1991), especially ch. 4.

(12) A. M. Thernstrom, *Whose Votes Count? Affirmative Action and Minority Voting Rights* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), 9.

(13) There are parties that operate quotas for youth (usually defined as under 30), but no one, to my knowledge, argues that voters aged between 18 and 25 should have a proportionate representation in parliament.

(14) W. Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford, 1995), ch. 7.

(15) Since segregation is the fundamental ordering principle of gendered societies, women can be said to share at least one interest in common: the interest in improved access. See H. Skjeie, *The Feminization of Power: Norway's Political Experiment (1986-)* (Oslo, 1988).

(16) See e.g. C. T. Mohanty, 'Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience', in M. Barrett and A. Phillips (eds.), *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates* (Cambridge, 1993).

(17) H. Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley, 1967), 168.

(18) J. Jacquette, 'Power as Ideology: A Feminist Analysis', in J. S. Stieh m (ed.), *Women's Views of the Political World of Men* (New York, 1984).

(19) I. Diamond and N. Hartsock, 'Beyond Interests in Politics: A Com ment on Virginia Sapiro's "When are interests interesting?" ' *American Political Science Review*, 75/3 (1981), 719.

(20) This is one of the arguments made by Anna Jonasdottir, who sees needs talk as potentially paternalist, and not sufficiently insistent on the political involvement of those in need; see her 'On the Concept of Interest, Women's Interests, and the Limitation of Interest Theory', in K. B. Jones and A. Jonasdottir, *The Political Interests of Women* (London, 1988).

(21) N. Fraser, 'Struggle Over Needs: Outline of a Socialist—Feminist Critical Theory of Late Capitalist Political Culture', in N. Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Cambridge, 1989).

(22) J. B. Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* (Princeton, 1981), 246.

(23) J. B. Elshtain, 'The Power and Powerlessness of Women', in G. Bock and S. James (eds.), *Beyond Equality and Difference* (London, 1993).

(24) The phrase comes from Sara Ruddick's 'Maternal Thinking', *Feminist Studies*, 6 (1980).

(25) J. Mansbridge, 'Feminism and Democracy', *American Prospect*, 1 (1990), 134.

(26) V. Held, 'Mothering versus Contract', in J. J. Mansbridge (ed.), *Beyond Self# Interest* (Chicago and London, 1990). Held is careful to clarify that she is not proposing the mother—child relationship as the paradigm for all social relations; she follows Michael Walzer in considering that different paradigms will be appropriate in different domains.

(27) C. A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), 37.

(28) M. Dietz, 'Citizenship with a Feminist Face: The Problem with Maternal Thinking', *Political Theory*, 13/1 (1985); M. Dietz, 'Context Is All: Feminism and Theories of Citizenship', *Daedalus*, 116/4 (1987); N. Fraser, 'The Ethic of Solidarity', *Praxis International* (1986).

(29) Dietz, 'Context Is All', 17–18.

(30) H. Valen, 'Norway: Decentralization and Group Representation', in M. Gallagher and M. Marsh (eds.), *Candidate Selection in Comparative Perspective* (London, 1988).

(31) Skjeie, 'Rhetoric of Difference', 234.

(32) Ibid. 258.

(33) This compared with 15% women, 5% black people, and only 4% aged 18–30 at the 1968 National Convention; see J. I. Lingle, 'Participation, Representation, and Democratic Party Reform', in B. Grofman, A. Lijphart, R. B. McKay and H. A. Scarrow (eds.), *Representation and Redistricting Issues* (Lexington, Mass., 1982), 175.

(34) A. Ranney, 'Comments on Representation within the Political Party System', in B. Grofman, A. Lijphart, R. B. McKay, and H. A. Scarrow (eds.), *Representation and Redistricting Issues*, (Lexington, Mass., 1982), 196.

(35) R. E. Goodin, 'Convention Quotas and Communal Representation', *British Journal of Political Science*, 7/2 (1977).

(36) Ibid. 259.

(37) Ibid.

