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“The impact of female representation on citizens' political involvement”

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Abstract

Female theorists have often argued that a higher female representation in political power produces powerful symbolic changes (Sapiro, 1981; Phillips, 1995). However, there are almost no studies that try to understand whether or not those changes actually occur. This paper seeks to cover this gap, by analysing whether the presence of a woman in key political positions produces any impact on the citizens' level of political involvement. It focuses on seven established democracies where a woman has served as president or prime minister.

Using national and international public opinion surveys, it compares citizen's level of political involvement before and after the change in gender composition of political power occurred in each country.

I expect to find signs of impact, but not a clear, direct and independent impact. On the contrary, I expect it to be affected by many factors, namely the political system of the country, the personal traits of female politicians, and the environment of the election.

Introduction

It is commonly believed that political recruitment is a very important feature of democracies and that it ought to be a democratic process: “(...) it should be possible in principle for every citizen to run for office” (Weßels, 1997: 76). However, in practical terms, many groups remain under-represented in all levels of political power. Most of the studies on political under-representation have tried to explain the factors that account for this. The present paper seeks to look at a much more unexplored area, by trying to understand what consequences a more proportionate political environment produces on the attitudes of the citizens towards the political system and the politicians. While illuminating the relationship between descriptive representation and citizens’ attitudes toward politics, this project aims to contribute to the literature on political representation.

Some authors have argued that avoiding the political participation of a group brings that group to internalize the idea that they are not able to be politically active (Taylor, 1992 and Phillips, 1995). Accepting this premise, I expect that a change to a more proportionate political environment will produce an impact on the traditionally under-represented groups’ level of political involvement. Furthermore, it has been argued that a more equilibrated political environment is also expected to have a positive impact on the legitimization of the political system (Mansbridge, 1999). Therefore, the second expectation for this paper is that a more equilibrated political environment will have a positive impact on all groups of the society political involvement. I will be looking at women, since they remain among the least politically represented groups.

The concept of *political involvement*, the dependent variable, comprises all kinds of political attitudes, namely, the level of interest in politics, feeling of political efficacy, political knowledge, and so on.

This paper is part of a larger project which consists of my PhD thesis. There, my independent variable – *a more gender equilibrated political environment* – will be operationalized by looking at different layers of political power, namely the existence of female president or prime-ministers, the percentage of female MPs (mainly after the adoption of quotas), high female representation in cabinet (at least 40% of women), the

presence of a female minister with a traditionally masculine portfolio (for example, finances, foreign affairs), the existence of a female leader of one the biggest political parties in country, and finally the presence of women in key positions at local level. However, in this paper, I will be only looking at the first mentioned layer, i.e. the existence of female president or prime-ministers. The **objective** of this paper is therefore to analyze whether the presence of a woman in key political positions, such as president or prime-ministers, produces any impact on the citizens' level of political involvement.

An article published in 1996 stated that only 25 women had ever held the most senior positions of political leadership in their country (Adler, 1996)¹. This number has definitely increased in the last decade. At the moment 35 women - current and former Presidents and Prime Ministers – are members of the Council of Women World Leaders². Moreover, this number is not the total number of women who ever had one of those positions. In fact, it does not include previous members of the Council who are now deceased (four in total), or women who were President or Prime Minister but decided not to be member of the Council. That is the case with Margaret Thatcher, for example. This paper focuses on seven established democracies³ where a woman has served as president or prime minister (see table 1).

¹ “The first elected female Prime Minister, Sirimavo Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka, took office in 1960. She was followed by just two other women in the 1960s – Indira Gandhi, who was elected Prime Minister of India in 1966, and Golda Meir, who became Israel’s Prime Minister in 1969” (Adler, 1996: 135).

² The Council of Women World Leaders was created at a 1996 summit meeting of 11 of the world's then-current and former Presidents and Prime Ministers. The first convening of the council took place in 1997 at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland (1990-97), is the current Chair of the Council. Webpage: <http://www.cwwl.org/> .

³ I followed the definition of established democracies proposed by Mark Franklin (2004: 6), according to which democracies may be considered established if they have been holding free and fair elections from the end of World War II. "

Table 1: Women Leaders focused by this paper

Country	Name	Office	Date
Finland	Tarja Halonen	President	2000 - present
France	Edith Cresson	Prime Minister	1991-92
Germany	Angela Merkel	Chancellor	2005 - present
Ireland	Mary Robinson	President	1990-97
Ireland	Mary McAleese	President	1997 – present
New Zealand	Jenny Shipley	Prime Minister	1997-1999
New Zealand	Helen Clark	Prime Minister	1999- present
Norway	Gro Harlem Brundtland	Prime Minister	1981, 1986-89, 1990-96
United Kingdom	Margaret Thatcher	Prime Minister	1979-1990

This paper is organized as follows. The *Introduction* is succeeded by the *State of the Field*, where the literature done on this topic is reviewed. Then the *Research Design*, which is composed of the *Puzzle* and *Methods and Data*, is presented. Finally, section four presents and discusses the *Preliminary Results*, which consists of a first attempt to look at the data. Here I show that in some countries there are signs of impact of female politicians on citizens' political involvement.

State of the Field

In the United States, and also, albeit to a much lesser extent, in Europe, some research has been done into what would happen to women's *political engagement* if politics were not widely perceived as "a man's game". Although most of these studies have observed a significant impact from the presence of women in the political environment, others have reached opposite results.

Jeffrey Koch (1997), Susan Hansen (1997), and Virginia Sapiro and Pamela Johnston Conover (1997) concentrated on the 1992 American elections. Koch observed that women who live in states with a female Senate candidate have more probability of recalling the candidate's name, but only in an electoral environment (like the one offered by the 1992 elections) where the symbolic representation of women is a salient concern

(Koch 1997). The exact same conclusion was reached by Susan Hansen (1997), who found that the existence of a female major-party candidate for Senate or governorship cancels the gender gap in political proselytizing in the 1992 elections but not in other elections. The reason for this difference between elections is that “it is not the presence of women alone, but women focusing on issues of concern to women, that mobilizes women to proselytize” (Hansen, 1997: 96). In examining the 1992 elections, Sapiro and Conover (1997) observed that the gender gap in the level of attention to the news about electoral campaign and in the number of campaign acts disappeared in districts where a woman was candidate for the House of Representatives or Senate.

Nancy Burns, Kay Schlozman and Sidney Verba (2001) noticed that the presence of women in the political environment has an impact on women’s political engagement⁴. Quoting Karp and Banducci (2008: 106) about Burns *et al* (2001)’s work:

“Women are likely to be aware of female candidates and are more likely to be interested in the campaign when women compete. 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: 354-355)”.

Lona Rae Atkeson found overwhelming support for such an impact on many political engagement variables when female candidates are visible and competitive (2003). The idea that the mere presence of female politicians might not be enough, but that they should be visible is also argued by Davil Campbell and Christina Wolbrecht (2006), the first authors to analyse this impact among adolescents. They found out that the gender gap in adolescents’ intention to engage in political activity as adults decreases (or disappears) when more attention is paid to women in politics nationally and when there are *viable* female candidates for Senate, House and Governor. Lonna Atkeson and Nancy Carrillo also observed that between 1988 and 1998, the percentage of females in state legislatures (both upper and lower) produced an impact on women’s feeling of external political efficacy (2007).

⁴ The same authors had previously tried (Verba *et al*, 1997) to prove this impact and had then reached a mixed result (a “*definitive maybe*”). That result gave them reasons to continue exploring the topic.

Jennifer Lawless (2004) instead did not find much support for the symbolic representation effect, although like the previous authors she also studied the USA and used a very common database, the National Elections Study (NES) from 1980 to 1998. Lawless analysed the impact that gender congruence between respondent and officeholders has on many women's political attitudes. She perhaps did not get the same results because she did not try to isolate the effect of the visible or competitive female officeholders, but instead included them all simultaneously. However, Kathleen Dolan (2006) did a similar study using the same data, for 1990 – 2004, and while she did consider competitive races, she too found only limited support.

In Europe there are far fewer similar studies on this area. In fact, I am aware of only three studies dealing with the impact of female politicians on women's political engagement (one of which is unpublished). The first, which focuses on the British case, refers to the topic only very briefly. It concludes that in seats where a female MP was elected to Parliament, not only was female turnout significantly higher, but other patterns of civic participation (such as the interest in campaigns or the likelihood to work for a candidate or party) were also affected (Norris *et al*, 2004).

The second study is an unpublished cross-national analysis which tests whether female members of parliament serve as political role models to adult and young women. After controlling for several parallel explanatory factors, it concludes that the percentage of female representation in national parliaments produces an impact on women's political engagement (Wolbrecht and Campbel, 2006).

The third study is a very recent article, in which Jeffrey Karp and Susan Banducci (2008) analyse this impact across 35 countries, using data from the Study of Electoral System (CSES). The authors failed to observe any impact of a higher female representation in parliament on women's (and men's) level of political engagement. However, they did find that "citizens [women and men] 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" (Karp and Banducci, 2008: 112).

Although I did not do a wide bibliographic review of the literature on minority groups, I detected a very significant difference between the impact of political context on

minorities and on women. In the former the scholars frequently report having found a significant negative impact of the analyzed political environment on the *other* group. For example, Barreto *et al* observed that non-Hispanics living in Latino majority districts have a lower turnout than average (2004: 74). Gay also noted that white citizens had lower levels of turnout in districts with black congressional representation (2001). This opposite effect does not apply to men when women are in power. On the contrary, some authors observed (but do not explore) that the presence of women on the ballot has a *positive* effect on men (for example, Hansen, 1997; Lawless, 2004; Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler, 2005; Karp and Banducci, 2008)⁵. This is one of the big gaps in the literature which is covered by this paper; as far as I know there are no studies up until now that explore the effect that the presence of female politicians has on men.

Furthermore, the only country about which we really know something concerning the impact of political environment in citizens is the United States and even the knowledge on the US is far from being solid and homogenous.

Research Design

Puzzle

The puzzle tackled by this paper starts with the argument, proposed by Charles Taylor (1992) and Anne Phillips (1995), that states that prevent a group of people from being represented in political power is a sign of non-recognition of that group and contributes to giving that group a demeaning picture of itself. This means that all the groups that are descriptively under-represented in politics may internalize the idea that they are not able to be politically active. My **first argument** is that if this is true, then by changing the gender composition of political power in order to include some members of a traditionally under-represented group, this should contribute at least slightly to that group feeling more politically involved.

Many studies have shown that there is still a gender gap in some forms of political participation (for example, Burns *et al*, 2001: 357; Inglehart e Norris, 2003;

⁵ As will become clear later on, the impact that female politicians have on male citizens is one of the main hypothesis of this project. However, I have not yet theorized much on this topic. I am working on it at the moment.

Morales, 1999; Baum and Espírito-Santo, 2004; Baum and Espírito-Santo, 2007) and in many forms of political attitudes (for example, Burns *et al*, 2001; Atkeson and Rapoport, 2003). One of the reasons why this might still be the case is the fact that there are few women occupying important political power positions and that might lead women to internalize that they are not able to be politically active. As Susan Handen has suggested, if the gender gap in political engagement was a simple function of individuals' resources, we would expect it to have diminished (or disappeared) over time as women's access to education has increased (1997: 76). Since the gender gap is still significant in many types of political attitudes and activities, we have to admit that there is something else accounting for it.

This argument has two steps: 1) if resources do not totally explain the gender gap in political attitudes and activities, then the gap must also be a result of a different socialization into politics for boys and girls; 2) political socialization depends on many factors, but the different political socialization of boys and girls is partly a result of the female under-representation in high political positions.

Furthermore, like Jane Mansbridge (1999), I argue that a more proportionate political representation may also contribute to pass a more legitimate vision of politics since the presence of women in political power is usually seen as a good thing and as a sign of a healthy democracy by all. This may be related to at least two things. Firstly, following the stereotypes on female behaviour, women tend to be seen as care-givers, as more concerned about others and therefore, their entrance in politics is sometimes pointed out as a way of improving the way politics work. Secondly, the fact a woman occupies an important political position means that there is a refreshing political process happening, it is associated with a waking up of a sleepy institution, and the system might be looked at with better eyes because of that. Therefore, the **second argument** of this thesis is that a more gender equilibrated political environment not only shows the under-represented groups that they are able to be politically active, but also contributes to the legitimization of the political system and consequently increases not only women's but also men's level of political involvement.

The main hypothesis of this research is therefore the following:

H1: A change to a political environment where a woman (or women) occupies a political leadership position will have a positive impact not only on women's but also on men's political involvement.

But the literature seems to show that it cannot be any kind of change. In fact, to my knowledge, none of the studies that use the mere presence of women in political power as an independent variable— for example, the percentage of women's representation in national parliaments (Karp and Banducci, 2008) or living in a state with a female Senate (Verba *et al*, 1997) – succeed in finding a significant symbolic impact of female representation. Concerning presidents and prime-ministers, a way of measuring the importance of the political position is by looking at the countries' political system. In parliamentary systems, the Head of State (President or King/Queen) has usually a secondary role; he/she is very often a ceremonial figurehead. I expect to find more impact in parliamentary systems where the woman occupies the prime ministerial position. On the contrary, I do not expect to find much impact on parliamentary countries in which women serve as President. In other words:

H1a: Female prime-ministers are expected to produce more impact in parliamentary than presidential systems, while female presidents are expected to produce more impact in presidential than in parliamentary political systems.

The literature on the topic suggests that some other factors are likely to influence the impact. Concerning how citizens perceive their female representative(s), her/their personal characteristics are very important for her /their identification both as (an) important politician(s) and a woman (women). In addition, when the descriptive representation of women is a salient concern (Koch 1997), when the female candidate focuses on issues of concern to women (Hansen 1997) or when the environment of the election or the media focus on it, it seems more likely to observe an impact. Therefore, we should consider the following secondary hypotheses:

H1b: The more the female politician(s) present(s) female traits, the bigger the impact.

H1c: The more issues related to women are raised, the bigger the impact.

Many other hypotheses could be considered, namely citizens' heterogeneity, i.e., the fact that the presence of female politicians might have different levels of impact on

different kinds of citizens, depending for example on their political preferences and on their level of political sophistication. However, in this state I did not have to possibility to test for this and other missing hypotheses yet.

Methods and Data

The causal effect that this paper focuses on seems particularly difficult to tackle, since there is a high risk of spurious correlations: “what appears to be an effect of the presence of female MPs may actually be the effect of a political or social context that facilitates both female representation and women’s political engagement and attitudes” (Wolbrecht and Campbell, 2006).

All the studies done on this topic so far used cross-sectional data. But as Steven Finkel proposes:

“In cross-sectional analyses, the measurement of variables at a single time point makes it difficult to establish temporal order, and hence to rule out the possibility that covariation between *X* and *Y* is produced by *Y* causing *X*, or through a reciprocal causal relationship” (1995: 2).

As far as I am concerned, unless one uses Panel Data, or at least “repeated cross-section” or “trend” data, there is always the risk of misleading the order of the causal relation. This risk is even more present when it has been proven that the reciprocal causal relation is likely to occur. Some studies have proven that contextual factors (such as socio-economic development or socio-cultural attitudes) strongly account for the political under-representation of women (Conway *et al*, 1997; Norris and Inglehart, 2001; Inglehart and Norris, 2003). In order to be sure that I am accounting for the causal mechanism that I want to test, I will analyse the level of female political involvement before and after any key change in the gender composition of political power occurred. Here is the list of datasets which I have considered so far per country.

Finland (Tarja Halonen: President **2000** – 2006; 2006 – **present**)

- European Election Study (EES) 1999 & 2004 (Trinity College Dublin, School of Social Science and Philosophy, Department of Political Science)⁶

⁶ Webpage: http://www.tcd.ie/Political_Science/staff/michael_marsh/ees_trend_file.php . Note: EES datasets from 1989, 1994, 1999 and 2004 available for downloading free of charge.

France (Edith Cresson: Prime Minister **1991- 1992**)

- EES 1989 & 1994

Germany (Angela Merkel: Chancelerin **2005 – present**)

- Eurobarometer 61.0 2004 & EB 64.2 2005 (ICPSR databank)

Ireland (Mary Robinson: President **1990 - 1997** & Mary McAleese: President 1997 – **present**)

- EES 1989, 1994, 1999 & 2004

New Zealand (Jenny Shipley: Prime Minister **1997 – 1999** & Helen Clark: Prime Minister 1999 – **present**)

- International Social Survey Program (ISSP): Role of Government III, 1996

- International Social Survey Program (ISSP): Citizenship, 2004

Norway (Gro Harlem Brundtland: Prime Minister **1981; 1986 – 1989; 1990 – 1996**)

- European Voter Database 1977, 1981, 1985, 1989, 1993, 1997 (GESIS-ZUMA⁷)

United Kingdom (Margaret Thatcher: Prime Minister **1979 – 1992**)

- British Election Study Panel Data from February 1974 and May 1979

- British Election Study February 1974, October 1974, 1979, 1983, 1987 & 1992 (University of Essex⁸)

Preliminary Results

The following pages consist of a first attempt to examine data. The goal of this analysis is to check whether or not there seems to be any sign of impact from the *presence of a female President or Prime Minister* on the citizens' level of political involvement. Since this is merely a descriptive analysis and also due to some data limitations (which become clear later on), I do not claim to prove the existence of any impact, but only state that there are reasons to believe that there might be an impact.

Tarja Halonen is the first female President of Finland. She was elected for the first time in March 2000 and re-elected in January 2006. Table 2 presents the level of political interest and satisfaction with democracy in Finland before and during Halonen's presidency. There are absolutely no signs of change.

⁷ Webpage: <http://www.gesis.org/en/research/EUROLAB/evoter/> . Note: I obtained it through a college from the EUI.

⁸ Webpage: <http://www.essex.ac.uk/bes/> . Note: I obtained it through a college from the EUI.

Table 2 – Finland: level of interest in politics and satisfaction with democracy, before and during the presidency of Tarja Halonen (percentages and means)

	Women		Men	
	1999	2004	1999	2004
Interest in politics				
a great deal (4)	5.4	6.2	12.0	7.4
to some extent (3)	40.0	35.2	45.4	41.9
not much (2)	41.4	48.4	33.3	44.0
not at all (1)	13.2	10.2	9.3	6.7
Valid n⁹	280	469	216	430
<i>Mean</i>	2.4	2.4	2.6	2.5
Satisfaction with democracy				
very (4)	10.0	8.0	16.0	12.1
fairly (3)	66.3	71.0	66.2	70.0
not very (2)	18.9	18.0	16.0	15.1
not at all (1)	4.8	3.0	1.9	2.8
Valid n	270	462	213	430
<i>Mean</i>	2.8	2.8	3.0	2.9

Source: European Election Studies (EES) 1999, and EES 2004¹⁰.

In May 1991, President François Mitterrand¹¹ appointed Edith Cresson to the position of French Prime Minister. Her low level of popularity together with the fact that the Socialist party did very badly in the 1992 regional elections forced her to leave office in April 1992¹². Table 3 shows no difference between the level of interest in politics in France and satisfaction with democracy before and after Cresson. However, I would need data from 1992 and 1993 to confirm the result.

⁹ Non-answers were excluded from all the analyses in this chapter.

¹⁰ Gender Gap Test, Independent-Samples T-Test:

1999: interest in politics: $t = 3.1451$; $df = 494$; $Sig. = 0.0018$; satisfaction with democracy: $t = 2.4897$; $df = 466.85$; $Sig. = 0.0131$

2004: interest in politics: $t = 2.5625$; $df = 897$; $Sig. = 0.0106$; satisfaction with democracy: n.s.

¹¹ François Mitterrand served as President of France from 1981 and 1995.

¹² Information taken from wikipedia.

Table 3 – France: level of interest in politics and satisfaction with democracy, before and after the government of Edith Cresson (percentages and means)

	Women		Men	
	1989	1994	1989	1994
	Interest in politics			
a great deal (4)	7.3	5.6	17.0	16.6
to some extent (3)	32.7	29.9	37.9	34.8
not much (2)	37.5	40.1	29.8	30.5
not at all (1)	22.5	24.5	15.3	18.1
Valid n	1585	1021	1445	983
<i>Mean</i>	2.25	2.17	2.57	2.50
	Satisfaction with democracy			
very (4)	2.9	4.0	7.8	5.1
fairly (3)	50.8	47.4	55.3	49.8
not very (2)	36.9	34.0	28.2	30.6
not at all (1)	9.4	14.7	8.7	14.5
Valid n	731	1978	714	1952
<i>Mean</i>	2.47	2.41	2.62	2.45

Source: European Election Studies (EES) 1989, and EES 1994¹³.

Angela Merkel has been the chancellor of Germany since November 2005. Although we would need more recent data to make a more precise statement¹⁴, table 4 seems to show that between 2004 and 2005 both female and male citizens started discussing politics more often and started convincing others of which party they should vote for.

¹³ Gender Gap Test, Independent-Samples T-Test:

1989: interest in politics: $t = 9.4863$; $df = 2955.29$; $Sig. = 0.0000$; satisfaction with democracy: $t = 3.9828$; $df = 1443$; $Sig. = 0.0000$

1994: interest in politics: $t = 8.1085$; $df = 1952.61$; $Sig. = 0.0000$; satisfaction with democracy: n.s.

¹⁴ Also because probably the fieldwork of EB64.2 (which took place in October & November 2005) coincided with the campaign and election in Germany.

Table 4 – Germany: level of political discussion and of trying to convince others regarding political behavior, before and during Angela Merkel’s mandate (percentages and means)

	Women		Men	
	2004	2005	2004	2005
	Political discussion			
frequently (3)	15.7	20.6	21.4	33.0
occasionally (2)	61.5	63.5	65.3	59.1
never (1)	22.8	15.9	13.3	7.9
Valid n	1081	773	966	760
<i>Mean</i>	1.93	2.05	2.08	2.25
	Trying to convince others			
often (4)	5.1	7.4	8.5	10.8
from time to time (3)	34.7	37.5	42.6	40.8
rarely (2)	37.4	36.8	33.2	35.5
never (1)	22.8	18.3	15.7	12.9
Valid n	1061	773	943	752
<i>Mean</i>	2.22	2.34	2.44	2.49

Source: Eurobarometer 61, February & March 2004, and Eurobarometer 64.2, October & November 2005¹⁵.

Ireland’s presidency has been occupied by women for the past 18 years. This trend began with Mary Robinson in December 1990, who occupied the position during one mandate (seven years). She was followed by Mary McAleese in November 1997. In November 2004 McAleese started her second mandate as President. Graphs 1 and 2, mainly the first one, show an overall tendency for the level of political involvement of both Irish men and women to increase. The black lines showing the average of the EU citizens demonstrate that this is by no means the tendency in Europe. In 1989, the values for Ireland and the EU were basically the same, but while the European values did not change, the Irish values increased¹⁶.

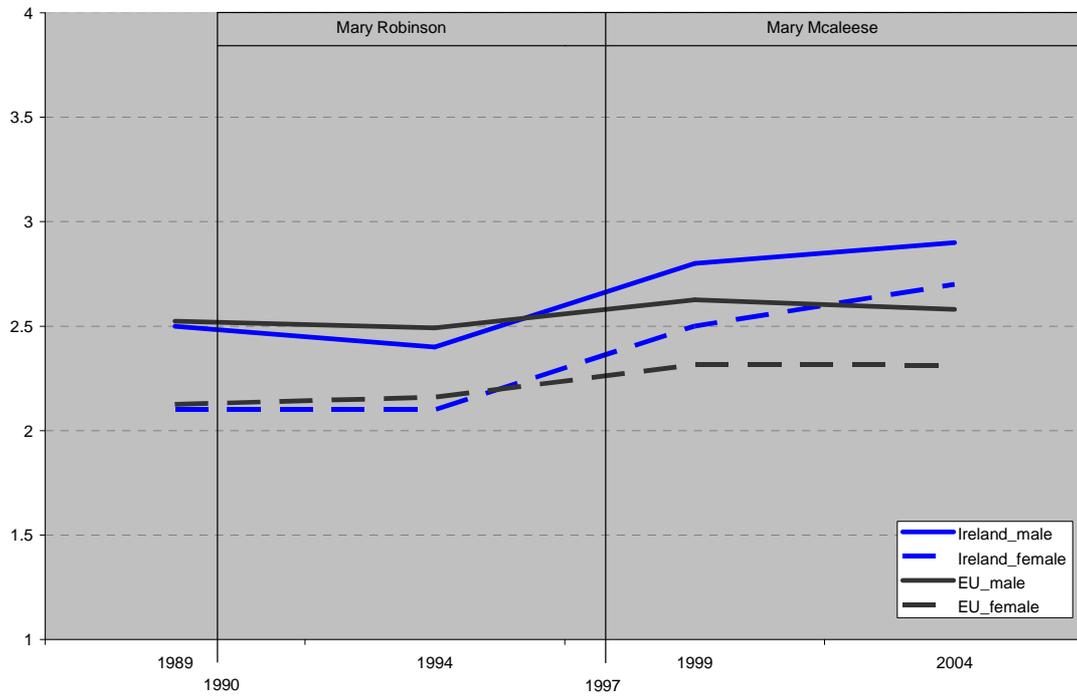
¹⁵ Gender Gap Test, Independent-Samples T-Test:

2004: political discussion: $t = 5.713$; $df = 2045$; $Sig. = 0.00$; convince others: $t = 5.711$; $df = 2002$; $Sig. = 0.00$

2005: political discussion: $t = 6.728$; $df = 1531$; $Sig. = 0.00$; convince others: $t = 3.538$; $df = 1519$; $Sig. = 0.00$

¹⁶ This is obviously a very fast lecture of these graphs. Many things remain unclear, namely why did the level of political interest of Irish men decrease in 1994 (graph 1)?; and more important why is the level of satisfaction with democracy decreasing since 1999 in Ireland (graph 2)?

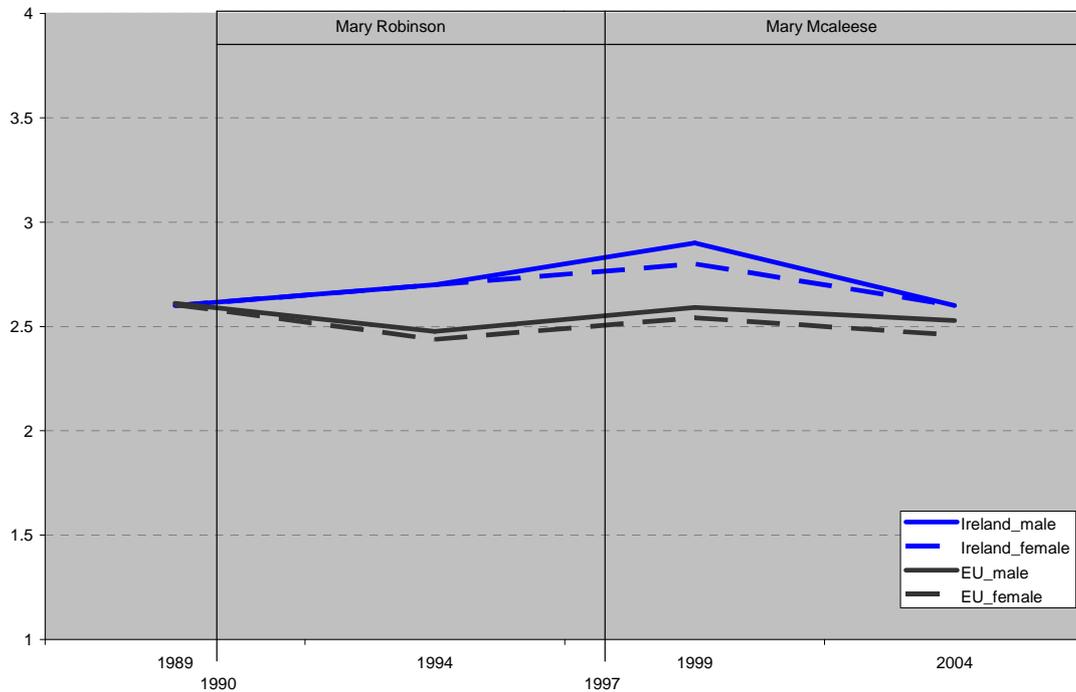
Graph 1 – Ireland and EU: level of interest in politics before and during female Irish presidency (mean on a scale from 1 “not at all” to 4 “a great deal”)



Source: European Election Studies (EES) 1989, EES 1994, EES 1999 and, EES 2004¹⁷.

¹⁷ Gender Gap Test, Independent-Samples T-Test (for Ireland only):
1989: interest in politics: $t = 9.7946$; $df = 2999$; $Sig. = 0.0000$
1994: interest in politics: $t = 7.1971$; $df = 1982.66$; $Sig. = 0.0000$
1999: interest in politics: $t = 3.6759$; $df = 468.915$; $Sig. = 0.0003$
2004: interest in politics: $t = 4.8574$; $df = 1138.65$; $Sig. = 0.0000$

Graph 2 – Ireland and EU: level of satisfaction with democracy before and during female Irish presidency (mean on a scale from 1 “not at all” to 4 “a great deal”)



Source: European Election Studies (EES) 1989, EES 1994, EES 1999 and, EES 2004¹⁸.

Jenny Shipley was Prime Minister of New Zealand between December 1997 and December 1999. She was immediately followed by Helen Clark who still occupies the position. Table 5 shows changes in the expected direction of the three variables presented: feeling of political efficacy, and two measures of feeling politically informed. Furthermore, although the change can be observed in both men and women, it is more substantial among the latter. In fact, while in 1996 women felt that others were better informed than themselves (significantly more than men did) in 2004 that gender gap stopped being significant (see footnote under table 5).

¹⁸ Gender Gap Test, Independent-Samples T-Test (for Ireland only):
1989: satisfaction with democracy: n.s.
1994: satisfaction with democracy: n.s.
1999: satisfaction with democracy: $t = 2.4200$; $df = 495$; $Sig. = 0.0159$
2004: satisfaction with democracy: n.s.

Table 5 – New Zealand: level of feeling of political efficacy and level of feeling of understand political issues, before and during the two female Prime Ministers (percentages and means)

	Women		Men	
	1996	2004	1996	2004
	“People like me have no influence on what the government does”			
agree strongly (5) + agree (4)	61.5	47.3	60.4	49.6
neither agree nor disagree (3)	16.7	20.4	12.5	17.3
disagree (2) + disagree strongly (1)	21.8	32.3	27.1	33.1
Valid n	600	745	530	583
<i>Mean</i>	3.56	3.39	3.52	3.42
	“I understand important political issues”			
agree strongly (5) + agree (4)	58.4	64.4	69.5	74.1
neither agree nor disagree (3)	24.3	22.5	18.8	16.8
disagree (2) + disagree strongly (1)	17.3	13.1	11.6	9.1
Valid n	581	741	522	572
<i>Mean</i>	3.45	3.59	3.65	3.79
	“The others are better informed than I am”			
agree strongly (5) + agree (4)	18.7	12.9	11.3	13.7
neither agree nor disagree (3)	36.2	34.4	33.9	28.4
disagree (2) + disagree strongly (1)	45.1	52.7	54.8	57.9
Valid n	588	741	522	581
<i>Mean</i>	2.71	2.56	2.50	2.47

Source: International Social Survey Program (ISSP): Role of Government III, 1996 & ISSP: Citizenship, 2004¹⁹.

Gro Harlem Brundtland served as Norwegian Prime Minister for three terms: from February to October 1981, from May 1986 until October 1989, and from November 1990 until October 1996. Graph 3 measures the level of feeling of political efficacy: the lower the value the higher the feeling of being able to influence politics. The graph presents an increasing tendency for the Norwegian public to feel that their voice counts. Furthermore, since 1993 the gender gap has stopped being significant (see footnote under graph 3). These results might be connected with the change in gender composition of the

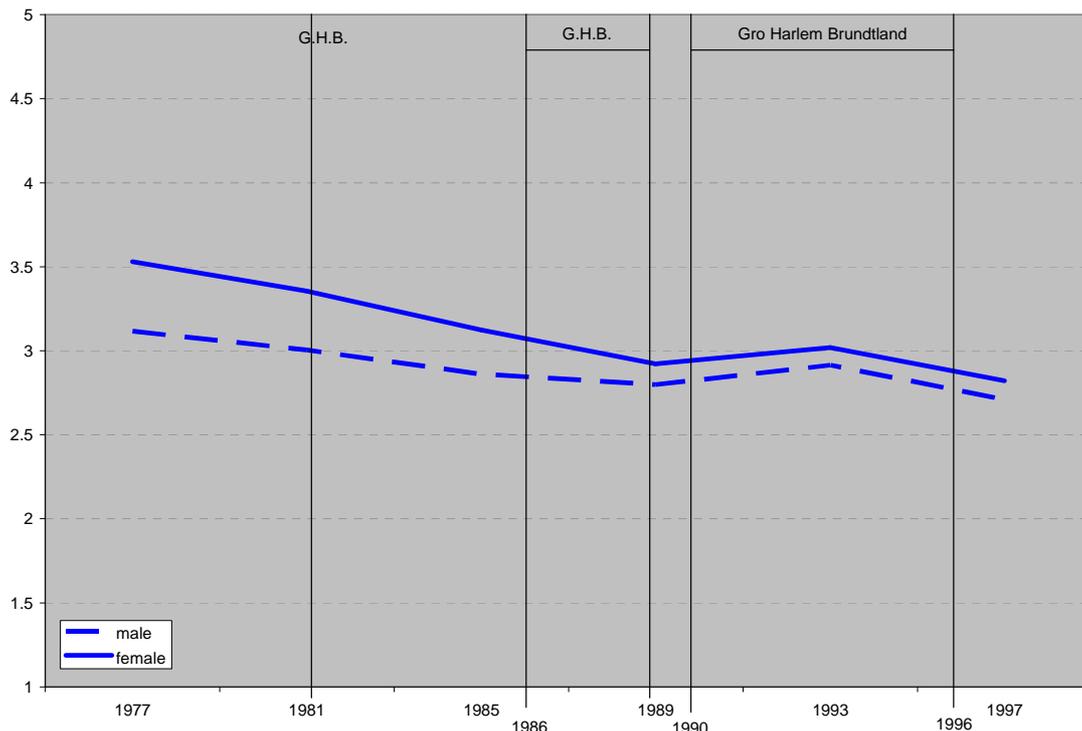
¹⁹ Gender Gap Test, Independent-Samples T-Test:

1996: no influence on government: n.s. ; understand political issues: $t = 3.899$; $df = 1101$; Sig. = 0.000; others better informed: $t = -4.195$; $df = 1108$; Sig. = 0.000

2004: no influence on government: n.s; understand political issues: $t = 4.041$; $df = 1311$; Sig. = 0.000; others better informed: n.s.

position of Prime Minister or might be the result of the ordinary evolution of a progressive society.

Graph 3 – Norway: level of agreement with sentence “People like me can vote but we can’t do anything else to influence politics” before and during Gro Harlem Brundtland’s mandate (mean on a scale from 1 “complete disagreement” to 5 “complete agreement”)



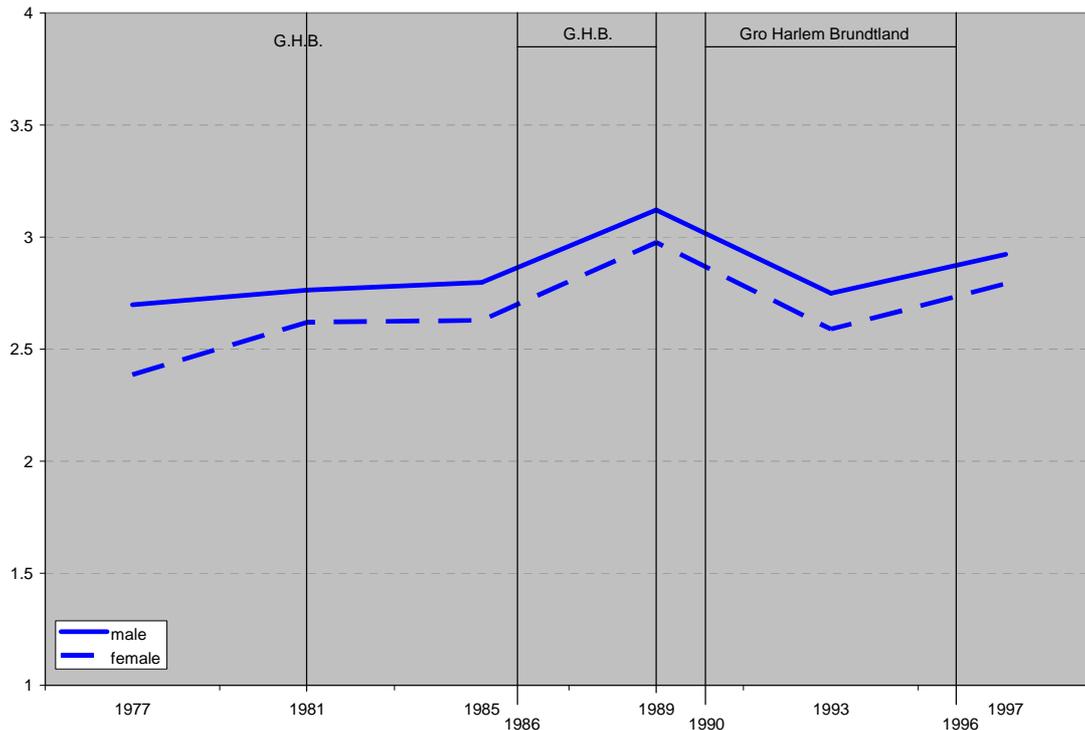
Source: European Voter Database 1977, 1981, 1985, 1989, 1993, 1997²⁰.

The previous results are corroborated by graph 4, which shows an overall tendency for the level of political discussion to increase among both men and women in Norway. The most interesting result is maybe the increase in women’s (but not men’s) level of political discussion between 1977 and 1981 (the first time Brundtland was

²⁰ Gender Gap Test, Independent-Samples T-Test:
1977: no influence in politics: $t = -5.5840$; $df = 1648.56$; $Sig. = 0.0000$
1981: no influence in politics: $t = -4.5251$; $df = 1528$; $Sig. = 0.0000$
1985: no influence in politics: $t = -3.9999$; $df = 2022.68$; $Sig. = 0.0001$
1989: no influence in politics: $t = -1.9775$; $df = 2122$; $Sig. = 0.0481$
1993: no influence in politics: n.s.
1997: no influence in politics: n.s.

elected). This increase produced a substantial decrease on the gender gap, which remained significant until 1997 (see footnote under graph 4).

Graph 4 – Norway: level of political discussion before and during Gro Harlem Brundtland’s mandate (mean on a scale from 1 “never” to 4 “daily”)



Source: European Voter Database 1977, 1981, 1985, 1989, 1993, 1997²¹.

In May 1979 the Conservative party defeated the Labour party and Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, a position that she would hold for more than a decade. Table 6 seems to indicate that there was no change at all in the citizens’ level of political involvement between 1974 and 1979.

²¹ Gender Gap Test, Independent-Samples T-Test:
1977: discuss politics: $t = 6.0394$; $df = 1717$; $Sig. = 0.0000$
1981: discuss politics: $t = 2.6843$; $df = 1584$; $Sig. = 0.0073$
1985: discuss politics: $t = 3.7197$; $df = 2123.71$; $Sig. = 0.0002$
1989: discuss politics: $t = 3.4822$; $df = 2161$; $Sig. = 0.0005$
1993: discuss politics: $t = 4.0872$; $df = 2129.98$; $Sig. = 0.0000$
1997: discuss politics: $t = 3.5201$; $df = 1991.11$; $Sig. = 0.0004$

Table 6 – United Kingdom: level of interest in politics and political discussion, before and during Margaret Thatcher’s mandate (percentages and means)

	Women		Men	
	Feb 1974	May 1979	Feb 1974	May 1979
	Interest in politics			
a great deal (4)	15.7	11.1	21.7	16.2
some (3)	44.7	44.5	51.4	53.5
not much (2)	32.4	35.0	22.8	26.8
none at all (1)	7.2	9.5	4.0	3.5
Valid n	432	434	424	426
<i>Mean</i>	2.69	2.57	2.90	2.82
	Frequency of political discussion			
often (3)	21.9	22.0	30.7	27.4
sometimes (2)	34.2	31.7	31.9	32.6
rarely (1)	43.9	46.3	37.5	40.0
Valid n	433	432	427	423
<i>Mean</i>	1.78	1.76	1.93	1.87

Source: British Election Study Panel Data from February 1974 and May 1979²².

These results suggest that a change in gender composition of presidential or prime ministerial positions might have produced an increase in citizens’ political involvement in four of the seven countries analyzed. Therefore, my main hypothesis, *H1* is at least partially confirmed. The secondary *hypotheses* might help in understanding some of the results obtained.

Let us consider *H1a*: *Female prime-ministers are expected to produce more impact in parliamentary than presidential systems, while female presidents are expected to produce more impact in presidential than in parliamentary systems.* Table 7 presents a summary of the results obtained, by political system. In all countries (except the UK) which have a parliamentary system and a woman as Prime Minister a sign of impact was found. Regarding the two parliamentary countries where a woman served as President,

²² Gender Gap Test, Independent-Samples T-Test:

1974: interest in politics: $t = 4.0020$; $df = 852.632$; $Sig. = 0.0001$; talking about politics: $t = 2.7662$; $df = 858$; $Sig. = 0.0058$.

1979: interest in politics: $t = 4.7875$; $df = 852.782$; $Sig. = 0.0000$; talking about politics: $t = 2.1482$; $df = 853$; $Sig. = 0.0320$

the results are mixed. The expectation is confirmed for Finland (no impact) but not for Ireland (apparent impact). I will come back to the exceptions (Ireland and UK) later on.

Finally, France features a semi presidential system, where the executive power is shared by the President and the Prime Minister. When both parliament (and per consequence the Prime Minister²³) and President belong to the same political party, the President emerges as the preeminent political figure. That was the case when Edith Cresson was Prime Minister in France. Considering this fact, together with Cresson’s low level of popularity, it is no surprise that I found no sign of impact for France.

Table 7 – Summary of the results obtained by political system

Countries	Political position occupied by a woman	Political System	Signs of impact? Yes or no.
Finland	President	Parliamentary	No
France	Prime Minister	Semi-Presidential	No
Germany	Chancellor	Parliamentary	Yes
Ireland	President	Parliamentary	Yes
New Zealand	Prime Minister	Parliamentary	Yes
Norway	Prime Minister	Parliamentary	Yes
United Kingdom	Prime Minister	Parliamentary	No

Not finding any sign of impact as a consequence of Margaret Thatcher’s election is not very surprising, as a previous study (Banducci and Karp, 2000), although following a totally different research question, had already failed to show an impact of Thatcher on British women²⁴. Two reasons might explain the peculiarity of Thatcher.

Firstly, she might not have been perceived as a “normal” woman, in a stereotypical sense (*H1b: The more the female politician(s) present(s) female traits, the bigger the impact*). Her determination (King, 2002: 446), together with the hardness of the policies she implemented (well expressed through the nickname “the iron lady”) might be a sign of this. And secondly, she did not raise any issues of concern to women; on the contrary she promoted “what many referred to as policies that were hostile to women’s interest” (Adler, 1996: 150) (*H1c: The more issues related to women are*

²³ “The Prime Minister is named by the President of the Republic. Because the National Assembly can, by a vote of censure, force the resignation of the government, the choice of Prime Minister must reflect the majority in the Assembly (Wikipedia, about France).

²⁴ Susan Banducci and Jeffrey Karp observed that in Canada, Australia and New Zealand female party leaders consistently produced significant gender gaps with women on average giving more favourable ratings to female leaders. However, the same did not apply to Britain: “women did not tend to give Thatcher higher ratings than men in either of the elections under study [1979 and 1987]” (2000: 826).

raised, the bigger the impact). Another plausible explanation is that the 1970's were a long time ago, shortly after the emancipation of women had started. In fact, all the studies that found an impact were based on much more recent data.

Finally, why do female Irish Presidents seem to produce an impact, irrespective of Ireland being a parliamentary system? Two reasons might answer this question, at least concerning Mary Robinson²⁵. Firstly, she enjoyed great levels of popularity: in 1996 more than 90% of the Irish population supported her (Adler, 1996: 145). In other words she contributed to give importance to her political position, which was in principle only a figurehead one. And secondly, she described "women's issues as one of the most important reasons that she chose to run for presidency of Ireland" (Adler, 1996: 150).

However, Robinson's characteristics apparently do not differ much from those of Finish President Tarja Halonen, where an impact was not found. Like Robinson, Halonen is also very popular (88% of the Finish people approved her in 2003 and 76% in 2006²⁶) and is very concerned about women's issues²⁷.

Conclusion

The data seems to suggest that the presence of women in political positions produces a symbolic impact on citizens' level of political involvement in some countries but not in others. A more accurate and sophisticated analysis, and a deeper reflection are needed in order to understand the differences between the countries and to confirm whether the results found are credible.

²⁵ I could not gather enough information about Mary McAleese to be able to answer that question.

²⁶ Information taken from Wikipedia.

²⁷ "In the 1960's she quit the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (...) to protest against its policy of taxing church members, and its stance against female priests" (wikipedia, about Tarja Halonen).

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