Gender and Women's Influence in Public Settings

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Abstract

Does gender equality in public meetings improve as women's numbers grow? Research applying critical mass theory to the exercise of influence in public discussion and decision making reveals a complicated story. Women have made significant progress in education, employment, and the attainment of elected office; yet, they continue to lag behind their male counterparts in substantive, symbolic, and authoritative representation. Across political, nonpolitical, and experimental settings, women's participation and influence does not follow necessarily from their numerical proportion. We review previous studies of how women's lower status is manifested in group interaction, and we argue that research can better identify when and how numbers matter by attending to the group's context, institutional features, and informal norms. We describe cutting-edge research designed to explore the effects of institutional rules and norms on women's authority. Women's increasing numbers in positions of potential influence constitutes a timely, promising, and challenging agenda for further scholarship.

WOMEN AND CRITICAL MASS THEORY

One of the most intriguing theories in social science is the theory of numerical representation in organizations, known as *critical mass*. According to this theory, elegantly outlined by Kanter, the relative prevalence of members of a subordinate social group in an organization sets in motion a set of processes that either reinforce or eliminate the group's disadvantage in that setting (Kanter, 1977). While numbers are not destiny, they are a major cause of disadvantage.

The theory can be applied to the case of subordinate groups in general, but here we are concerned with the case of one particular group: women. We focus on women because their status remains lower than men's even in relatively egalitarian societies. That women continue to suffer lower status is not obvious, given women's substantial progress, approaching or even

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exceeding parity with men in roles that just a few decades ago were the near exclusive purview of men. Yet women remain highly underrepresented in the most powerful roles—and power is at the root of gender inequality in societies around the world.

Women's lag is on display in the United States. For example, the percentage of female CEOs in Fortune 500 companies remains under 4%, and that in corporate boards include only 16% (Pande & Ford, 2011). Young women are more likely to earn college degrees than young men, but their political engagement and activity—an important correlate of education—rises less than men's does. Women are more likely to vote, but less likely to discuss politics (Burns, Schlozman, & Verba, 2001). Women compose only about 20% of elected government positions at nearly all levels of office.

Kanter's theory has been applied to organizations, but has received relatively less scholarly attention in an important setting: public meetings. In a democratic polity, formal authority is exercised in public meetings, where binding decisions affecting the collective are made. As many observers have commented, public meetings about matters of common concern are the lifeblood of democracy. At the town council, the school board, the neighborhood committee, the PTA (parent–teacher association), or a host of other volunteer gatherings, the public meeting is where the voice of the people is to be found. And an important criterion for democratic success is equal participation and influence in meetings.

As much as formal rules of equal vote or equal opportunity to speak at meetings may appear egalitarian, equality of access is a far cry from a reality in which every voice is heard. Women and other disadvantaged groups may not participate or influence equally with men, because meetings entail not only an exchange of information and reasons but also social interaction, and along with it, women's authority deficit. When individuals interact, social inequalities in political representation are not left at the meetinghouse door (Mansbridge, 1983).

The central question we take up is whether gender equality in official public meetings improves as women's numbers grow. The question is all the more timely now, as governments and related organizations around the world are instituting various requirements to raise women's numbers. Most prominent among these efforts has been the UN official declaration that its member countries should take measures "to integrate women in elective and nonelective public positions in the same proportion and the same levels as men." The UN's target, established in 1995 and to which it has recommitted as recently as 2009, is 30% women in decision-making positions. The UN describes this proportion as the "'critical mass,' believed to be necessary for women to make a visible impact on the style and content of political decision-making" (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2005). Softer

forms of gender diversity requirements abound as well. For example, the US Securities and Exchange Commission required in 2010 that corporate boards disclose their formal efforts to achieve diversity. Neither is the United States alone (Krook, 2009); for example, India amended its constitution to require the reservation of one-third of seats in its hundreds of thousands of village governing bodies for women (Ban & Rao, 2009).

The study of women's numbers in democratic political settings is thus crucial to our understanding of women, power, and equality. It can inform us about how numbers affect influence in the places expressly designed for its exercise.

What is influence? In political science, influence in democratic decision-making bodies takes one of several forms. One form of influence is *substantive representation*. To engage in substantive representation means introducing items onto the agenda; advocating for them; getting others to advocate for them; and altering the group decision or outcome consistent with that advocacy. A second form of influence is *symbolic representation*. This entails the perception that a social identity group can and should exercise power and leadership. In the case of women, it is the view that women are appropriate agents of influence (Reingold, 2008). A more dynamic, process-oriented form of influence in political science is *authoritative representation*. This form of influence instantiates symbolic representation *during the process of group discussion or the deliberation* of a public meeting. Authoritative representation is "any feature of communication among decision-makers that affects their authority during the decision-making process" and "the set of actions that occur during the process of representation … that affect the expectation that a person, or group, can exercise power and influence others" (Mendelberg, Karpowitz, & Oliphant, 2014, pp. 3, 18). To carry authoritative influence is, first of all, to speak, and then, to receive positive affirmation in the form of little negative feedback and much positive feedback.

The study of gender and influence in public meetings requires us to explore all three concepts. In many settings, women have less substantive, symbolic, and authoritative representation. The question is why, and what can be done about it.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

How do numbers shape the various forms of women's representation or influence? According to critical mass theory, thresholds for progress in women's status occur as women advance from <15% (which renders them marginalized tokens), to a noticeable minority of approximately one-third,

when their status improves, to roughly even, when their status reaches equality.[1]

Kanter theorizes that numbers shape the nature of interaction between social identity groups. Tokens occupy the lowest status because they are perceptually salient, receive disproportionate attention, and face weighty performance pressures. The perceived differences between tokens and the numerically dominant are exaggerated—dominant members become more conscious of their commonalities and contrast themselves with the numerical token, drawing sharp boundaries that isolate the numerical minority. Lacking counterexamples to reform stereotypes of the minority, dominants engage in overgeneralization from stereotypes and distort their perception of the token member to assimilate them into those stereotypes. As a result, tokens can be trapped in stereotypical roles (Kanter, 1977).

The theory of critical mass is well positioned to explain women's relative dearth of influence-seeking behavior in public meetings because when women interact with men, women tend to seek influence less than men do. For example, in an analysis of survey respondents' beliefs about their ability to "speak well enough to make an effective statement" at a town meting, Karpowitz (2006) showed that women feel significantly less confident in their speaking abilities than men, even after controlling for education, political knowledge, and the possession of important civic skills. Experimental studies demonstrate that unless the topic is commonly perceived as feminine, men are privileged in mixed-gender group discussions (Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999). In four-person mixed gender groups tasked with reaching a decision on a hypothetical dilemma, men were more likely to offer information, make suggestions, share their opinion, and be perceived as competent than women (Wood & Karten, 1986). Experimental studies testing double standards found that women were more likely to defer to men and to accept male competence and influence even when men underperform them. Men only yielded to women's influence when a woman was known to have outperformed them earlier in the experiment [review in Foschi and Freeman (1991)].

Seeing as women tend to participate less than men in mixed gender interactions, critical mass theory predicts that as women's numbers grow and reach a balance, so should their status. However, that prediction receives some puzzling disconfirmation from political settings. In public meetings, for example, women's numbers sometimes bear strikingly little relationship to their willingness to participate actively. Bryan's extensive research on Vermont town meetings revealed that on average between 1970 and 1998, about 46% of

1. On this theory, status and influence are closely related. Kanter's concept of status encompasses the kinds of influence with which we are concerned here, as well as negative stereotyping and harassment.

meeting attenders were women, but they constituted only 36% of the speakers and only 28% of the speaking turns (speech acts) at the meetings (2004, p. 214). Overall, Bryan finds that the correlation between women's meeting attendance and their speaking behavior is negative: the greater women's proportion of town hall meeting attendees, the *lower* is their share of speakers (p. 222). As he writes, "for the life of me and after thirty years of research, I remain stumped when it comes to predicting women's involvement" in public meetings (p. 249). These perplexing results are not unique to the United States. While some research finds that quotas mandating increased presence for women facilitate active participation, other studies of Indian villages and Israeli kibbutzim find that numbers alone do not translate into the active use of voice (Ban & Rao, 2009; see Karpowitz & Mendelberg, 2014).

Mixed evidence for the effect of women's numbers is also a feature of scholarship on legislative decision making. Although female legislators do seem to have distinct preferences from their male colleagues, rising numbers of women in the legislature do not consistently lift women's influence or ensure that women's distinctive priorities and perspectives receive attention or successful action (Reingold, 2008).

Not only have women struggled to translate increased numbers into policy change, but studies in various settings also report evidence of a backlash. When elections in Britain raised the proportion of female MPs in the House of Commons above 15%, women reported that their attempts to use more feminine styles of decision making were rebuffed by their male colleagues, who pressured them "to conform to the traditional norms of the House" (Childs, 2004). Women in New Zealand experienced more openly hostile opposition and verbal aggression from male MPs as they debated parental leave and childcare policy (Grey, 2002). In American state legislative committees composed of a large minority of women, male committee chairs were more verbally dominant and less inclusive of women (Kathlene, 1994). Such backlash need not always be verbal: Kanthak and Krause (2010) explored an entirely different but highly consequential type of behavior—campaign contributions to fellow members—and found that as the proportion of women increases in the member's party, men decrease their contributions to women while increasing them to men.

In sum, achieving critical mass does not always alter the culture of the deliberating body or inexorably lead to the authority that would allow women to enact real policy change, even on the issues that are especially important to them (Lovenduski, 2005). Other factors seem much more important than women's numbers (Weldon, 2011).

Why do numbers sometimes fail? In addition to backlash from men, other factors, familiar to students of legislative behavior, can overwhelm an increase in the presence of women in the legislative chamber. Women's

influence may be depressed by the wages of party loyalty, their lack of seniority, competing institutional demands, constituency expectations that require prioritization of issues other than women's distinctive concerns, and dependence on other (mostly male) actors who control access to opportunity (Franceschet, Krook, & Piscopo, 2012).

The problem for critical mass theory is not merely that women do not always achieve increased authority as their numbers increase. The evidence also shows that women can sometimes exercise authority effectively when their numbers are few. In some state legislatures, for example, female "tokens" sponsor and enact women's issue bills as effectively as do their male colleagues, and may be as successful as the women in more gender-balanced legislatures (Bratton, 2005). A few exceptional "token" women may accomplish as much as or even more than a critical mass, according to some cross-national studies (e.g., Childs & Krook, 2006). As Karpowitz and Mendelberg summarize, "small numbers may not be fatal, just as large numbers may not be sufficient" (2014, p. 18).

Thus, Beckwith and Cowell-Meyers take issue with critical mass theory itself, concluding that the theory "is both problematic and under-theorized," its mechanism "unspecified" and the power of small numbers of women "neglected" (2007, p. 553). Dahlerup also doubts the power of numbers, holding that women's use of political power will pivot on other determinants (2006, p. 520). As Franceschet *et al*. describe the state of the critical mass research, raising women's numbers "may have positive, mixed, and sometimes even perverse effects on women's political representation" (2012, p. 13).

CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

Given these conclusions, the key question, in our view, is when—under what conditions—do women's numbers matter? When will more women lead to more authority for women, and when is it possible for women achieve authoritative influence even when their numbers are few?

We conclude that the answers to those questions often come from attending carefully to the institutions and contexts in which women attempt to exercise authority. Several studies indicate that larger numbers help when women use institutional mechanisms to work collaboratively. Preparing for opportunities to make institutional reform by predrafting legislation and identifying sources of support enabled women to make incremental changes in state legislative procedures that aided their larger goals (Thomas, 1994). Women, as institutional insiders or outside activists, can provide resources and actively frame debate to precipitate reform (Duerst-Lahti, 2002). Conversely, when the institution's incentives or structures undermine women's coalition-building efforts or tie women's fortunes to established

male power structures, women have trouble leveraging their larger numbers into substantial policy change (Franceschet *et al*., 2012). The larger context of women's empowerment, such as the success of feminist movements or discourse environments that are receptive to women's voices, may also help women achieve more substantial political gains and policy victories (Beckwith & Cowell-Meyers, 2007).

Taken together, the evidence from these studies leads to the conclusion that formal rules and informal norms shape the connection between numbers and authority. One recent thread of research attempts to study the rules that govern discussion and decision making at public meetings. Drawing on an extensive laboratory experiment conducted in two US locations, a conservative city in the mountain West and a more liberal town on the Atlantic seaboard, Karpowitz and Mendelberg (2014) show that women's authority in small group discussions about poverty and income redistribution is shaped by the interaction of numbers and decision-making rules. In this experiment, participants were randomly assigned to groups, which varied in their gender composition and in the decision rule they were asked to follow. In the condition most common to decision-making bodies in the United States and elsewhere—women constituting a numerical minority in groups deciding by majority rule—women's voices were rarely heard. In such groups, women held the floor for a lower proportion of the conversation than their numbers would have predicted; they were less likely to be seen as influential by the other members of the group; they were less likely to raise issues of distinctive concern to women, instead voicing preferences that were more in line with those of men; they experienced fewer expressions of affirmation from the men in the group; and they had more trouble moving the group in the direction of their preferred outcomes. In sum, women exercised substantially less voice and authority than the men in the group. As women's numbers increased from 20% to 80% of the group, these trends reversed, although in many cases, a supermajority of women was required before women spoke at rates proportional to their numbers.

Although the experimental results show that far more than the UN's 30% threshold was often needed, the trend for half of the experimental groups was consistent with the basic logic of critical mass theory. In groups deciding by majority rule, token women were severely disadvantaged, and women gained authoritative influence as their numbers increased. But under other institutional arrangements, the effect of numbers was far different. In groups randomly assigned to decide by unanimity instead of majority rule, token women talked substantially more than they did under majority rule and at average rates that were much closer to those of the men in the group. What's more, as women's numbers increased under unanimity rule, their average

speaking time and other markers of their influence did not increase substantially. For example, women's proportion of floor time in the group discussion actually decreased as their numbers rose, and increasing numbers under unanimity had null or negative effects on the content of their speech, the patterns of interruptions they received, and their ability to influence the group's eventual decision.

Numbers alone cannot explain these patterns. Instead, the effect of numbers on women's authority can be understood only by attending to the *interaction* of the group's formal decision rules and its gender composition. Institutional rules that can seem either arbitrary or at the least neutral thus carry profound consequences for women's authority. Why do the institutional rules condition the effect of gender composition so much? The answer is, in part, because rules set expectations about inclusion, interaction, and the meaning and use of power. In small group discussions, rules set in motion a set of conversational practices that work to either elevate or ignore women's authority. Majority rule signals a competitive dynamic in which minority views can be marginalized. Majority rule is good for women *when they are in the majority*—women are entitled and expected to exercise power. By contrast, unanimous rule empowers minority views and signals the need for inclusive cooperation instead of competition. As Gastil writes, decision rules that require consensus assume "that the minority viewpoint is crucial, so members may go out of their way to draw out quieter group members. Listening may also be enhanced, since consensus relies upon members understanding and considering what each other says" (1993, p. 52). While it is also possible that the majority will pressure the minority to conform, unanimity makes it impossible for the majority to ignore minority preferences entirely. It is, therefore, good for women when they are in the minority, but simultaneously empowers minority men, meaning that majority women may not be able to leverage their numbers in quite the same way as they would be able to do when they outnumber men under a different decision rule.

Evidence for the critical role for institutional rules in shaping women's authority is not limited to the laboratory. Karpowitz and Mendelberg (2014) also examined patterns of participation in school boards and discussion groups from around the country. School boards, which tend to make decisions by majority rule, are a helpful place to investigate the effect of women's numbers, as they are one of the few institutions in which the gender composition varies sufficiently to explore not just the effect of women becoming a larger minority but also the patterns on boards where women form a strong majority. Analyzing the motions and speeches recorded in the board's official minutes, Karpowitz and Mendelberg (2014) found confirmation of patterns discovered in the laboratory. On majority-rule boards with a majority of men, women's participation lagged far behind that of men—and did not

rise to levels equal to women's proportion on the board. As the proportion of women on the board increased, women came much closer to equality, but it typically took a supermajority of women—60% in the case of motions and 70% in the case of speeches—before women reached participation levels that matched their numerical proportion of the board.

Our argument is that rules matter for participation in large part because they shape norms of interaction. Thus, informal procedures and cues can also be critically important. For example, Karpowitz and Mendelberg (2014) reanalyzed data originally published by Walsh (2007) on patterns of participation in civic dialogue groups in Wisconsin and Illinois. These groups did not make a formal decision together, so there was no decision rule to speak of. Nonetheless, the group instructions emphasized the dynamics common to unanimous rule. Participants were explicitly instructed to "listen carefully," to "really try to understand what others are saying," and to avoid the temptation to "monopolize the conversation" (Walsh, 2007, p. 40). Karpowitz and Mendelberg (2014) found that women's patterns of participation mirrored the laboratory results for unanimous-rule groups—women's participation came closest to equality when women made up a smaller proportion of those in attendance and *declined* as the proportion of women increased. Thus, gender-neutral discussion norms and procedures, whether promoted by formal decision rules or informal conversational instructions, have gendered effects. Not only does majority rule create a winner-centric dynamic favoring men in most circumstances but consensus processes can actually backfire for women when their numbers are high, because in those groups, consensus leads men—and not women—to accelerate their participation.

Influence and authority can also be shaped by even subtler but no less powerful signals and conversational scripts. When norms of interaction emphasize group rapport and cooperation, women's active participation and influence are likely to be enhanced. When norms and cues are less cooperative or supportive, women are likely to participate less, experience lower status, and ultimately have more difficulty exercising influence. The pioneering work of Kathlene (1994) and Mattei (1998) shows that these informal cues can matter even in elite settings such as state legislative committees or congressional hearings. For example, Mattei's analysis of Senate hearings showed that compared to men, women were given less time to speak, experienced more hostile interruptions, were asked more challenging questions, were called on to provide more evidence, and were more often denied when they tried to interrupt. Male witnesses interrupted Senators as often as they were interrupted themselves, whereas female witnesses were interrupted three times for every time they interrupted a Senator. In this, and other male-skewed settings, men may use their interruptions to assert their authority and undermine women.

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Our call to the scholarly community, then, is to move beyond a sole focus on women's numbers and instead to examine how numbers interact with formal institutional rules and informal norms to build or undermine women's status, including their participation, authority, and influence. This endeavor should be interdisciplinary and methodologically diverse. It will mean, for example, bringing attention to variables familiar to political scientists, such as the rules and procedures of political institutions, together with concepts from social psychology, sociology, gender studies, and other related fields, such as the social norms that set cultural expectations for each gender's relative authority, the communication mechanisms that shape behavior in small groups, the ways that the gender composition of a group elicits gendered cultural scripts that shape interaction between individuals, and so on. It will draw on a variety of methodological approaches, including careful observation of different kinds of groups and settings, survey research into attitudes of participants before and after discussion, content analysis of group discussion, and laboratory or field experiments in which different features of groups are manipulated.

Such a research program brings with it important challenges. It calls for designs with sufficient group-level variation in both gender composition and institutional rules and with enough groups for meaningful analysis. One of the chief difficulties of a full assessment of the effect of numbers in legislatures, for example, is that there are few bodies in which women have achieved a majority or even an equal gender split. This challenge is not insurmountable, but it is complicated and thus adds variation in institutional rules or norms. In addition, people tend to self-select based on part on the norms that gender composition and rules create, and this implies the need to include exogenous variation in numbers and rules, as with randomized experiments.

This research also calls for increased attention to the norms of interaction that occur at public meetings or other deliberating bodies. For example, the presence of female judges on appeals court panels can affect judicial decisions, even after controlling for other factors (Farhang & Wawro, 2004), but more remains to be done to understand the mechanisms of these gender composition effects or the processes by which judges interact.

Therefore, the research we are encouraging requires scholars to take the group seriously as a unit of analysis, provide a sufficiently large number of groups and sufficient variation among them, and examine the effects on different individuals and the details of group dynamics and functioning. This is much more complicated than simply adding an indicator for individual gender or even group gender composition to a regression model. In a larger

sense, it means not only methodological innovation but also theoretical progress in exploring how women's, and anyone's, authoritative influence is produced. While the challenges are great, the authoritative influence of half of the population is a goal that is more than worthy of the effort.

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