

Women in Politics: A Comparison Between the United States and Britain

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Abstract

Ever since women were granted suffrage, they have been making historic strides in representing their sex in politics in the United States and United Kingdom. However, this success is clearly limited seen by the underrepresentation of women in politics in proportion to men. It is possible the number of elected women is related the parties-- such as how liberal the party is or how much of an effort the party is making to appeal to minorities. This study intends to investigate these possible causes of low representation of women in these countries by examining official records on how many female MPs and Congresswomen have been elected in a 20 year period as well as examining relevant elements of parties these elected women claim membership to, such as their ideological position and campaign strategies. The results of this research will result in a better understanding of the sex-specific hurdles women must overcome to become elected and possibly an explanation as to why women are underrepresented in politics overall in these plurality systems.

Keywords: Politics, Representation, Equality

1. Introduction

Through battles for suffrage and election rights, the number of women representatives has steadily increased in both the United States Congress and British Parliament. However, even though the recent numbers reached record highs for both countries when this study was conducted in mid 2014, these numbers are still nowhere near those of their male counterparts. In this time when critical women's issues including the extent of a woman's reproductive rights as well as the gender pay gap are in discussion in both the US and Britain, the need for the proper representation of women is more seen and clearly felt than ever.

The aim of this study is to compare the lower levels of women representation in the most prominent national legislatures in the US and Britain and investigate the possible causes of this phenomenon. This paper is divided accordingly into four sections. First, relevant information about the similar backgrounds of the US and Britain will be expounded upon to frame this study's settings. These two countries were selected due to the similar political systems dominated by two parties representing ideologies on both ends of the right-left ideological spectrum. Secondly, the evidence will be presented, confirming a significant gap between the number of male and female representatives. This gender disparity in representation was examined in the different contexts of an overview of women representation from 1990 to 2010, a comparison of women representatives to the total number of representatives before the 2014 midterm elections, and the number of women representatives by party. Thirdly, hypotheses explaining why this gender disparity exists will be discussed in separate sections exploring party positions and campaigns of the main two political parties of each country as well as the phenomenon of the gender gap in politics.

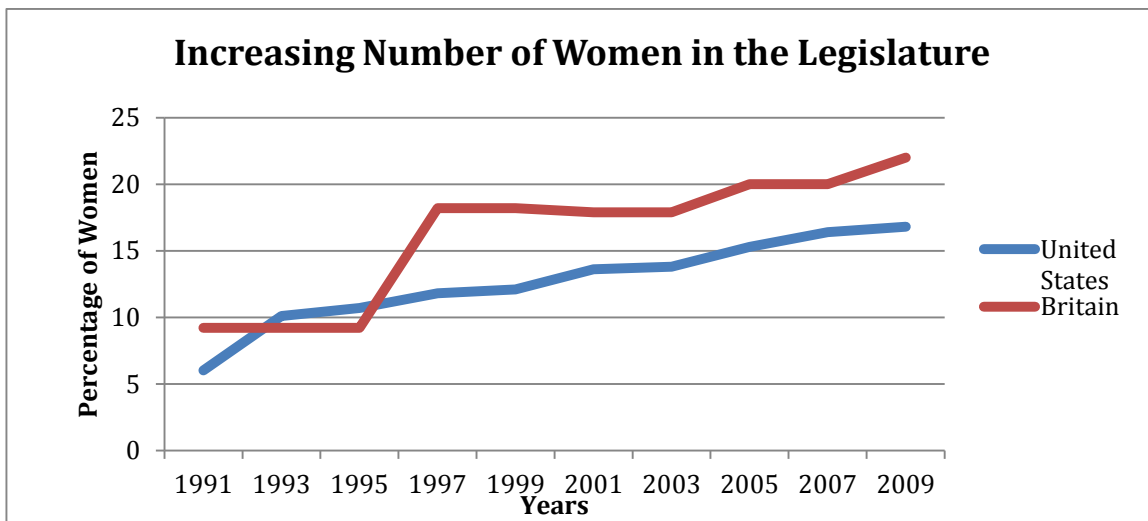
2. Background

Since the beginning of democratic election systems, women were restricted from the political process in the US and Britain. Women were not able to both vote and stand for election until 1920 in the United States and until 1928 in Britain, which also means women have not enjoyed these political rights for even a century in either country. Although the percentages of women making up the national legislatures of the US and Britain have made significant progress, their record highs only came up to a little less than or over 20% respectively – or in other words, the progress has simply not been significant enough.

The governments of the United States and Britain share common factors that make them adequately similar to be fitting cases to compare for this study. Both countries have in place a democratic government directly elected by the citizens. Moreover, both the House of Representatives and Senate of the United States and the House of Commons in Britain use a First Past The Post (FPTP) plurality electoral system where candidates with the most votes win the seat in their district. The system utilizes single member districts where citizens will vote for candidates rather than parties. It is crucial to this study that the FPTP system is used instead of other electoral systems for several reasons. One, FPTP systems tend to encourage the growth of stable political systems dominated by two parties according to Duverger's Law. The two main political parties of the United States political system are the Democratic Party and the Republican Party while for Britain it is the Labour Party and the Conservative Party. In both countries, the two main political parties represent the mainstream liberal and conservative positions on issues on a left-right ideological spectrum. This study will be framed with the assumption that the two main political parties represent the mainstream positions and interests of the left and right will let us see later how parties differ in their support of having equal representation through the efficiency of their conveyance of their position on the matter.

3. The Gender Disparity in Representation

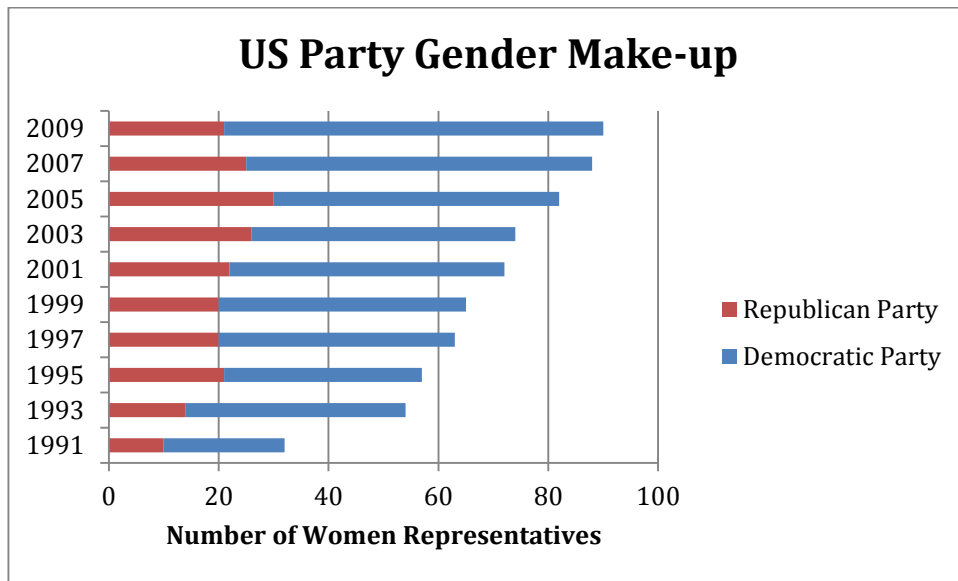
A disparity in representation with regard to gender was observed in the numbers of women MPs in British Parliament and Congresswomen in the US Congress. The data observed was taken from a recent twenty-year period from 1990 to 2010, cast in different frameworks. From different viewpoints, we found a prevailing pattern of a disparity in the number of women representatives in these national legislatures compared to their male counterparts.



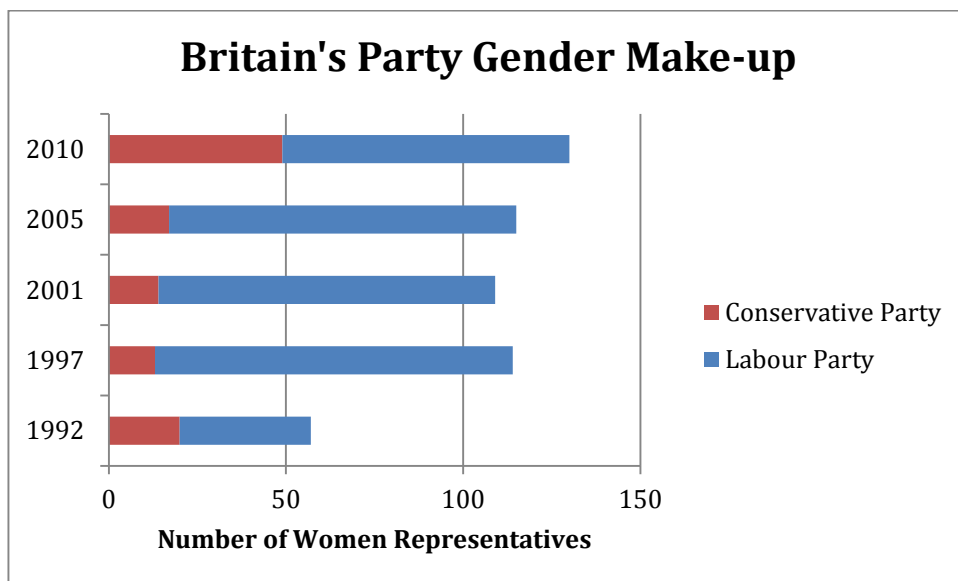
Graph 1. There is an increasing number of women being elected in both the US Congress and British Parliament from 1990 to 2010.

Over our chosen time period of 1990 to 2010, we compared the percentage of women making up the national legislatures of Britain and the US. In both countries, we see the percentage of women has steadily risen over the years (See Graph 1). However, these increases in the representation of women at the national legislature are modest at best.

As we can see from the graph in Graph 1, the percentage of women representatives did not reach 25%, a fourth of the national legislature, at even its highest. Conversely, this means more than 75% of US Congress and British Parliament consists of men. A gap between the number of women and male representatives is clearly seen in this setting.



Graph 2. The mainstream left party of the US, the Democratic Party, has an overwhelmingly large portion of women representatives in Congress.



Graph 3. The mainstream left party of Britain, the Labour Party, largely outnumbers the conservative right in the number of women in Parliament from their respective parties for the past twenty years.

Within the same twenty-year period, I split the total amount of women representatives each election year by their associated political parties for the US and Britain. As illustrated in Graph 2 and Graph 3, when women get elected into the US Congress and British Parliament, it is usually as a member of the liberal-leaning mainstream parties: the Democratic and Labour parties. In Graph 2, the proportions of women by parties stay relatively the same, though there is a noteworthy decrease in 2009. Meanwhile, in Graph 3, the Conservative Party had a pronounced increase in women representatives in 2010. By examining what parties women representatives belong to, it is possible to draw a

relationship between party ideology and women representatives. Though this demonstrates gender disparity in representation overall in both countries, this disparity is even steeper at the party level, with a significant proportion of women representatives belonging to the liberal parties.

4. Hypotheses on the Causes of Relatively Low Levels of Women Representation

Political culture, influenced by many actors, may play a role in the lower levels of women in the national legislatures. As influential actors, parties may affect the representation of women by their public reinforcement of societal norms. The party ideology of mainstream parties usually reflects the public's opinion on the expanse of topics ranging from economic issues, education issues, womens' health issues – along with implying what role women should have in society. As de facto gatekeepers to the political arena, parties may influence how attractive the idea of women representatives are. Parties change their positions with cues from the public as well as the media and voters in turn align with the parties that best represent their views.

Party influence and societal norms combine to create a gender gap in political ambition, thus leading to less women running for election and representing their gender in government. The roadblocks that impinge on a woman's inclination to run for office include how women perceive the political arena as biased against them, the lack of encouragement to run for office, and the persisting role of women as the main caretakers of children and the home. These barriers, though not in writing, considerably impact a woman's decision to run for office and thus the political representation of women in these pluralistic electoral systems.

5. The Role of Parties and Ideologies

Campaigns of well-known parties influence the public and reinforce ideas that are prevalent in society. Thus, the role of parties and other actors that influence the political culture of a country is instrumental in the perception of women in leadership roles, ultimately impacting their political representation in national legislatures. Studying womens' participation in politics, Kunovich and Paxton examine how political parties act as mediators for the relationship between country-level factors like the participation of women in the labor force and political outcomes for women¹. These political outcomes include: the percentage of women party leaders, percentage of female candidates in a country, and the percentage of women elected to office. The study had found how parties may be prone to thinking women are liabilities as candidates despite the success of women in the political arena worldwide¹. This way of thinking affects how parties select their candidates as well as their campaign material regarding representation.

What factors into the selection of candidates is important when examining countries such as Britain. Unlike the primaries of the US, the recruitment and selection of candidates is done entirely by the party in Britain¹. With this candidate selection process, candidates are wise to follow the lead of their party leader. Thus, the British public votes by party rather than by candidate, as the candidates do not differ significantly in their platforms within their respective parties. Parties change to reflect their changing opinions of their voters and voters align themselves with the parties that best represent their views². In other words, parties and voters mutually provide cues on political views. In Britain's case, it is evident that the parties' mindset of women being liabilities as candidates is reflected in their attitudes and projected onto their constituents. I argue that even those who do not align themselves strongly with any party will be affected by such widespread sentiment.

However, the cues and subsequent effects of the media as an actor cannot be ignored. In their influential role, the media sends cues to both political elites as well as the public. In a study examining three different democracies, Kittilson and Fridkin find a disparity in how the media portrays female and male candidates³. In fact, candidates were found to have been portrayed in long-standing gender stereotypes, resulting in substantial negative impact on the perception of the role of a woman in these countries. As a parliamentary democracy with similar media relationships, it can be assumed that Britain experiences the same effects as these democracies.

The media also has a negative effect on the perception of the role of women in America. Besides being one of the three democracies studied, America's female candidates may be experience even stronger effects of gender stereotyping from the media³. As a primary system, American voters pay much more attention to individual candidates and their platforms than in Britain. This means a female candidate can suffer more directly from harmful portrayals in the media when they are trying to inspire loyalty to themselves, not the party. Meanwhile this effect is arguably tempered in Britain by how voters look more towards the political party as a whole rather than the candidate.

Contrary to the media effect is how impactful a party regarding women candidates as liabilities are. Due to this

system of primaries in the US, the party has significantly less power over what a candidate does than in Britain. However, it must be noted that though US political parties do not control the candidate list, parties may influence how the public views the role of women. The women in positions to run will receive these cues and be adverse to running for office⁴. Overall, these actors and their actions in effect widen the gender disparity in representation.

6. A Gender Gap in Political Ambition

Perhaps surprisingly, women play a role in their underrepresentation – a significant gap exists between the political ambition of men and women. In their Citizen Political Ambition Study for the Women & Politics Institute, Professor Jennifer Lawless and Professor Richard Fox conducted numerous mail surveys and interviews with potential candidates such as political activists, lawyers, business leaders, etc⁴. In their report, it was found that women and men are unequal in their desire to seek candidacy, and that this desire “persisted across political party, income level, age, race, profession, and region.”⁴ Meaning, even the women with the advantage in political interest, income, and professional backgrounds do not close this gender gap in political ambition. Moreover, the study found women were less likely than men to even take the beginning steps to running for office including investigating how to put their name on the ballot, discussing running with friends and family, and considering campaign fundraising. If women do not take the most preliminary steps to pursue office, this further demonstrates a lack in political ambition in women. These findings of a gender gap in political ambition establish another plausible cause for the underrepresentation of women in politics. Interestingly, it seems women are not interested in representing themselves if going by this apparent lack of ambition for political office. However, these initially discussed findings are only the surface of the several factors that underlay them.

Seven factors were found to contribute to the gender gap in political ambition through obstructing a woman’s motivation to run for office or by complicating the decision to run. The factor I will focus on is how women are much more likely than men to consider the political arena as both highly competitive and biased against women⁴. The survey in their report titled “Gender Differences in Perceptions of the Electoral Environment” recorded perceptions of the electoral environment and of bias against women in politics. The results of the survey showed women thought the electoral environment was highly competitive and biased against them. The report states more than half the women in the survey sample did not believe women who ran for office did as well as the male candidates. Furthermore, seven out of ten women did not think female candidates could raise as much money for campaigning as their male counterparts⁴. The findings of this survey lead to women having a substantial lack of confidence in the political arena. By perceiving the electoral environment not only as extremely competitive, but also as skewed unfavorably towards women candidates, women would not be inclined to enter the political arena. Also, women could be forcing themselves to make strategic voting decisions based on inaccurate perceptions of a women’s chance of success in office. Like how plurality voting systems tend to lead voters to vote strategically for a large mainstream party that is more likely to win than a smaller, less centric party, women may strategically vote for the male candidate they think is more likely to win. Though women may support these female candidates, they will ultimately pick a male candidate with a similar platform. This lack of confidence dissuading women from running for office and also leading women to make strategic choices in voting would have significant impact on the political ambition of women in general and the underrepresentation of women at large.

The study by Lawless and Fox focus on the US and expands into other factors including: the candidacies of Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin worsening the perception of bias in the media regarding women, women being less likely to be encouraged to run for office, women believing they are less qualified to run for office, women candidates being more risk averse, women still being main care providers for the home, and so on⁴. These factors, supported by the large database of surveys indicate a significant gender gap in political ambition. If there is a lack of women running for office, there will undoubtedly be underrepresentation of women in Congress.

Despite this study being conducted solely in the US, there are strong hints to similar trends occurring in Britain. As reported by Counting Women In, there is underrepresentation of women in positions of power, political and in the public life⁵. Although there is indication that there is a gender gap in political ambition in Britain from the lack of women in positions of power generally, it must be remembered that the list of political candidates is decided by the party elites. However, parties are influenced by cues given by their voters and trends in the public. If there were higher numbers of women in positions of power, then this could be argued as a cue to the political elites of changing public opinion.

7. Conclusions

Women may have come a long way in their battle at the ballots, but they still have much further to go in catching up to their male counterparts in the US Congress and British Parliament. Despite the increases in party recruitment of women candidates across the political spectrum, the influence of political actors and related gender gap in political ambition in both the US and Britain seem to keep the number of women representatives in the national legislatures at lower levels compared to men. Parties may have strong influence in political culture, but they are in actuality reinforcing existing values in society. The cues from the public and media can help or prevent potential female candidates from running for office.

The persisting gender roles in these countries will persist unless action is taken in the form of women putting themselves in the public eye in positions of power. Although the US and Britain may not have conducive cultural environments for women to run for office, it is ultimately up to women to mobilize support groups and take initiatives in running for office. In the end, it is women who must fight to represent themselves.

This paper examines some aspects of the role of parties as well as the gender gap in political ambition. Parties are complicated in their power structures and organizations, though this paper only discussing the two main parties of two countries. The contents of this study could be expanded upon with further investigations into the intricacies of parties and more nuanced examinations of party linkages.

8. Acknowledgments

The author wishes to express their appreciation to Professor James Adams for his patient support and guidance.

9. References

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