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Women and political activism
(Dr. Rosie Campbell)

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Women and political activism: how can we help more women to climb the greasy pole?¹

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It is well documented that women are less well represented in democratic politics across the globe.² The exceptional cases, where women are equally or close to equally represented in national legislatures, often involve the employment of equality guarantees or gender quotas at the party or national level (Lovenduski 2005). In fact, about half of the top 20 OSCE countries registering sharpest growth in women's representation have used legal quotas; of the bottom twenty none have such constitutional requirements.³ The problem of women's under-representation stems from both demand and supply-side factors (Norris and Lovenduski 1995); in this paper I concentrate on measures to boost the supply of women candidates but this should not be taken to suggest that measures to boost demand are less important. In fact the over-whelming conclusion of empirical research in this area suggests that gender quotas are a necessary short-term measure to attempt overcome entrenched discrimination against women candidates (Dahlerup 2006; Franceschet and Piscopo 2008; Krook 2009; Murray 2012). This important caveat aside, in the paper I explore what we know about women's participation in politics and how this might help political parties recruit more women into politics.

There are few sustained differences in political attitudes and behaviour of men and women in Western democracies- in fact it is usually more appropriate to discuss 'gender overlaps' rather than 'gender gaps' (Baldez 2001)- but engagement with politics is one area where there is a persistent gap between men and women. Women are less interested in and knowledgeable about politics than men and they are less likely to participate in a range of formal political activities, excluding voting in elections. However, there are significant areas of civic engagement where women tend to be more active and more interested than men

¹ Sections of this paper draw on Allen, Peter, Rosie Campbell, and Ana Espirito Santo. Forthcoming. "The slippery slope: measuring women's political interests." in *Deeds and Words: Gendering politics (A Festschrift for Professor Joni Lovenduski)*, edited by Rosie Campbell and Sarah Childs. Colchester, Essex: ECPR Press.

² <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>.

³ See <http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/blog/womens-legislative-recruitment-no-simple-explanation-no-single-panacea>.

and creating more linkages between formal politics and wider civic participation is one obvious means for political parties to recruit more women. Multiple studies show that women are interested in local politics, in health and education but they are less interested in foreign affairs and partisan politics. In order to attract more women politics parties need to focus significant attention on the policy issues that motivate women. Women more often take on roles as footsoldiers and befrienders in voluntary groups and research suggests that they might underrate their own abilities, therefore parties should put structures in place to encourage more women to take on leadership roles. This is essential because political capital is likely to be more readily developed from within the leadership of organisations. The use of women only spaces and networks to help women to develop a peer group of political activists continues to be an important mechanism for boosting self-confidence and the provision of formal mentoring and training programmes can help to counteract barriers to participation.

Political Participation and Social Capital

In Western democracies women are no longer significantly less likely to turnout and vote than men; in fact in some states women are more likely to participate in elections.⁴ But women are less well represented in the upper echelons of political life. Table one shows that the regional average percentage of women in upper and lower houses of national parliaments varies from near parity in the Nordic case (42%) to the lowest level of representation in Arab states (13.8%). The figure of approximately 20% women in legislatures predominates in a large number of states that do not employ gender quotas at either party or constitutional level.

Table 1: Percentage of women in Parliament by region, July 2013

| | Single House or lower House | Upper House or Senate | Both Houses combined |
|---|-----------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Nordic countries | 42.0% | --- | --- |
| Americas | 24.8% | 25.0% | 24.8% |
| Europe - OSCE member countries including Nordic countries | 24.4% | 22.6% | 24.0% |

⁴ In every US presidential election since 1980 a greater proportion of women than men have turned out to vote.

http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/fast_facts/voters/documents/genderdiff.pdf

| | | | |
|---|-------|-------|-------|
| Europe - OSCE member countries excluding Nordic countries | 22.7% | 22.6% | 22.7% |
| Sub-Saharan Africa | 21.3% | 18.1% | 20.9% |
| Asia | 18.8% | 14.2% | 18.3% |
| Arab States | 15.7% | 6.8% | 13.8% |
| Pacific | 12.8% | 36.0% | 15.4% |

Source: IPU <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>

The explanation for this under-representation of women depends on two factors, the supply of women candidates and the demand for them (Norris and Lovenduski 1995). In reality these two sources of women's under-representation interact as women may exclude themselves from party politics because they recognise that they do not have the characteristics of the typical election candidate (Kenny Forthcoming). In this paper I focus on the potential supply for women candidates, rather than demand for them, and one means to do this is to examine to what extent women are active in politics at the grass roots level.

Feminists have been highly critical of outdated measures of political participation that focus only on explicitly partisan activities (Burns, Schlozman and Verba 2001; Norris, Lovenduski and Campbell 2004; Stolle and Micheletti 2006) and overlook protests, boycotting, buycotting⁵ and advocacy for pressure groups and the voluntary sector; when these activities are included in studies of political participation it is clear that in many states women are more likely than men to participate in many civic and cause oriented acts. Yet there remains a near universal gap in terms of *partisan politics* where women are less likely to be members of, or campaign for, political parties (Burns, Schlozman and Verba 2001; Lawless and Fox 2010). Early studies of political behaviour demonstrated that women in Western democracies were significantly less likely to be members of political parties or to be politically active than men (Almond and Verba 1963; Barnes and Kaase 1978; Duverger 1955; Verba, Nie and Kim 1978). Over time the sex gap in electoral participation has declined, and even reversed, but the sex gap in involvement with political parties, although diminished, remains (Inglehart and Norris 2003).

Feminist researchers have been troubled by this continuing divide and have sought to

⁵ Buycotting is deliberately buying goods for ethical or political reasons.

explain why women's high levels of civic activism do not translate into an equal presence in partisan politics.

Many studies of political participation have used the concept of social capital to help to explain how some people use their social networks to 'get by' whilst others use them to 'get on' (Lowndes 2000; Lowndes 2004). The concept of social capital and Robert Putnam's argument that it has a central role in underpinning democracy has had a significant impact on political research (Putnam 1995; Putnam 2000; Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti 1993). Feminist reaction to Putnam has followed two tracks, (1) critiquing his failure to consider the gendered dimensions of his claims and (2) highlighting the potential of the concept for explaining continuing inequalities in men and women's political participation. Importantly, when it comes to social capital women are not always worse off than men. Men's greater risk of social isolation, suicide and certain mental health conditions at least partially result from their lower levels of social capital in the form of personal connections and relationships (Halpern 2004). In contrast, women very often have strong personal networks that help them to manage their personal and family lives. But there is a question as to whether women have access to the kind of networks that would generate political connections and participation. We know that men and women join different associations - formal memberships- (Burns, Schlozman and Verba 2001; Norris and Inglehart 2006; Norris, Lovenduski and Campbell 2004; Rubery 2002), and that men and women tend to have different sorts of personal networks -informal memberships- (Lowndes 2000; Norris and Inglehart 2006) but until recently less was known about the political consequences of these differences. Vivien Lowndes sets out an important set of questions relating to gender and social capital:

'Are different forms (and levels) of social capital generated in different community settings?

Are men and women involved in different, gender-specific 'circuits' of social capital?

Might these serve to 'capitalize' political engagement in different ways?

(Lowndes 2000: 543)

These questions are taken up and explored by a number of researchers in an impressive edited collection (O'Neill and Gidengil 2006). In their chapter Pippa Norris and Ronald

Inglehart (Norris and Inglehart 2006) conduct a comparative study of group membership in fifty societies using the World Values Survey. Their findings corroborate many other studies, showing that men are over-represented in sports, political and professional groups (although the sex differences vary by country), and women are over represented in voluntary associations, particularly those related to education and religion. Significantly Norris and Inglehart show that time spent with family, as opposed to socialising with networks of colleagues and friends, is negatively associated with participation in formal associations; women's levels of social capital are, notably damaged by this (Norris and Inglehart 2006, 94). These findings are confirmed by Lowndes' chapter in the same volume which shows that women's social capital is more strongly associated with informal local networks than men's (Lowndes 2006). In addition to belonging to different kind of groups there is some evidence of small differences between men and women in the types of activities they undertake for them, with women more often 'befrienders' and 'footsoldiers' and men more often taking on leadership roles. And, crucially, undertaking leadership roles for a formal association appears to be more strongly associated with political participation than other kinds of activities (Campbell 2013). Overall, in terms of social capital, there remain small but persistent differences in the nature and quality of men and women's formal and informal networks. Women are over-represented in groups associated with education, health and religion and men are more often members of sports clubs, professional associations and political organisations. Women have better developed informal personal networks but these connections, useful as they are for organising childcare and social support, serve less well as transmitters of political knowledge and participation than other kinds of group memberships.

Interest in and knowledge of 'politics'

Women are less interested in formal politics than men (Burns, Schlozman and Verba 2001; Campbell and Winters 2008; Hayes and Bean 1993) and this gap persists even in states where there have been significant improvements in gender equality, with women gaining far better access to the previously male domains of higher education and paid employment (Burns, Schlozman and Verba 2001; Childs and Withey 2004; Espirito-Santo 2011).

The size of the gender gap in political interest varies depending on how the question is

framed. In one British study respondents were asked “If you were to open a newspaper and see the following articles how interested would you be in reading each article?” and shown a list of five items relating to education, healthcare, foreign policy, law and order and partisan politics (Campbell and Winters 2008). Women were more likely to say that they would be interested in reading the articles on education and healthcare and men were more likely to say that they would be interested in reading articles on foreign policy and partisan politics. Yet when asked whether they were ‘generally interested in politics’ (prior to the newspaper articles) the women’s self-ratings of political interest were significantly lower than men’s. These findings are suggestive of a disconnect between women’s high levels of engagement with some policy issues and their conception of what an interest in ‘politics’ entails and indeed what the researchers think counts as ‘politics’.

Women’s relative lack of interest in formal politics has been used to explain why women are less likely to be politically active and less likely to put themselves forward as electoral candidates (Norris and Lovenduski 1995); although later work has demonstrated that direct discrimination against women candidates is a powerful factor restricting their selection (Shepherd-Robinson and Lovenduski 2002).

In addition to the gender gap in political interest women also tend to do less well than men on measures of political knowledge (Frazer and MacDonald 2003; Kofman 1999) and this gap has been relatively stable over time (Outshoorn 1995; Outshoorn 2010). However, the knowledge gap is partially explained by the measurement instruments employed (Mondak and Anderson 2004; Outshoorn et al. 2012). Women tend to answer ‘don’t know’ more often and are less likely to make an informed guess which means that men can gain higher scores in political knowledge quizzes without, in fact, being any better informed (Mondak and Anderson 2004). Furthermore, the gender gap in political knowledge varies depending on what kind of political knowledge is measured. When asked for information on state of women in American politics (Dolan, 2011) or knowledge of government services and benefits (Stolle and Gidengil, 2010) the gender gap in political knowledge is eliminated. In addition to gender specific domains of knowledge there is some evidence that women and men learn more in different political environments: a 2011 US study found that partisan conflict was more likely to promote learning during a midterm election campaign among

young men, but young women learnt more in contexts of consensus.

'Young men gain the most knowledge in environments marked by conflict, such as in debates with friends or by living in communities marked by partisan division. Young women, however, appear to practice a civic or communal style of citizenship, where political learning is greatest for those who discuss politics with family and live in politically homogenous areas' (Wolak and McDevitt 2011, 506).

The Fabian Women's Network Mentoring and Political Education Programme (A Case Study)

In this section I draw on an evaluation of the Fabian Women's Network's mentoring and political education programme (2011-2013) that I conducted with Professor Joni Lovenduski (Birkbeck). The scheme is run by experienced leaders (Christine Megson & Caroline Adams) and receives support from high ranking politicians (particularly Seema Malhotra MP). The programme combines a ten month long mentoring scheme with a political education programme, comprising of a series of linked training events that encourage the development of a peer network alongside the one-on-one mentoring relationship. In the first year 22 mentees were offered a place on the scheme, 23 in the second year. As well as attending meetings with their mentor on an approximately monthly basis mentees participate in a series of linked training events, including an induction event at Westminster, a Parliament day, a trip to Brussels sponsored by three British Labour party MEPs and a residential training weekend. All participants in the programme completed a pre and post scheme questionnaire which included self-ratings of their political skills. The political skills that the programme is designed to develop were identified by the organisers to be particularly relevant for potential British Labour party election candidates.

The political skills questionnaire contained the following items:

- I know how Parliament works
- I understand the roles and responsibilities of the boards of public bodies
- I have a good understanding of Labour history, Labour policy and political economy
- I could explain to a new member how the Labour party works at constituency and national level
- Journalists and politicians are interested in my opinion

- If a radio station called me today I would feel confident taking part in a live political debate tomorrow
- I understand the process of running for selection to be a national election candidate
- I understand the process of running for appointment to a local or national public board
- I understand what it takes to be a good effective representative
- Local Fabian societies and CLPs are interested in inviting me to speak at their meetings
- I have a strong regional and national political network
- I know people on public boards or political life who I feel I can approach personally for information or advice
- Other people see me as a leader
- I would feel confident to be a leading speaker in a debate
- I am a confident speechwriter
- When I give a speech, I am persuasive
- I am confident in my ability to build relationships with senior party officers and politicians

Participants were asked to rate their own skills on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) for the battery of 17 items. On every item participants' self-ratings improved between the pre and post surveys. When the responses to all of the items were added together to create a political skills scale the average score among the 2011/12 cohort was 54 in the pre scheme survey and 74 in the post scheme survey and among the 2012/13 cohort the average in the pre scheme survey was 52 and 73 in the post scheme survey (out of a possible 102). Overall, the average shift in self-rated political skills across the first year of the programme was 20 percentage points and 21 percentage points in year two. This suggests that the programme was effective at improving the participants' self-confidence in their own abilities; analysis of the focus group transcripts provides more insight as to how this transformation was achieved.

The focus groups repeatedly returned to the issue of confidence and self-belief and its particular relevance to political and public life. There was general agreement that women

might be at a disadvantage in this regard and that they might be less likely to assert themselves in male dominated political settings.

Participant *"Politics is very male dominated- being able to speak up. [Having a women only space is] very important – sometimes you feel you can call on each other, support each other."*

An important feature of this developing political confidence was the willingness to express political ambition.

Participant *"I'm much more open about my ambitions with my friends and family- before it's just so embarrassing and now I will tell anybody."*

Participant *"[now I] talk openly to other people 'I've got this ambition'- we can talk about each other's ambitions. Realising what's possible. In the application I said I'd like to be a councillor because to say I wanted to be an MP was ridiculous and could never happen but now it seems possible/achievable."*

The development of a peer network was repeatedly mentioned as one of the most significant contributions of the scheme to the participants' political development.

Participant *"[It's not] just about the relationship with the mentor but with the people around the table."*

Another significant theme raised by the mentees and the organisers was the important role played by high profile politicians in supporting the programme. This manifested itself in several ways. It was striking how many participants referred to the first session (also held in the Shadow Cabinet room) and how being in that place made the possibility of a political life appear more real. The use of this room, and other Palace of Westminster resources was dependent on the good will of the MPs and administrators involved. Participants also mentioned the tour around Westminster and the Brussels trip as examples of how being present in political institutions helped them to foster a sense of belonging, perhaps even as sense of entitlement as a citizen to feel at home in the state's political institutions.

Participant *"The fact that we can sit in the Shadow cabinet room and think 'one day I could do this'"*

The results of this study strongly suggest that access to politically significant spaces is key to the implementation of a successful political mentoring and training programme. These functions cannot be readily outsourced to outside training providers and they do more than enhance the experience. The participants were very clear that inhabiting real political spaces was necessary in order to make the leap of imagination required to view themselves as potential politicians.

The involvement of high profile politicians in the training events was crucial, it stimulated the participants and encouraged them to think of themselves as future politicians.

Participant *“Meeting these women who were already successful made me realise I just needed to get on and do it. A real shift in terms of how I was approaching everything.”*

Participant *“Westminster and Brussels [trips were a] fantastic chance to experience, sitting here and having ministers giving us their expertise and time, sharing their experiences and having informal conversations with us.”*

The success of the scheme depended on the energy and good will of the organiser and it was effective in raising the confidence and aspirations of the participants. The selection of women who have already demonstrated a commitment enabled the scheme to work with a good level of specific content about real politics. The combination of mentoring with formal training insured that all participants gained a broad range of new skills and facilitated the development of a peer network. The use of elected politicians and real political spaces motivated and encouraged participants. The importance of political role models for women is explored further below.

Women in office

Women tend to feel less qualified and less motivated to run for office than men (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; Collier, LaPorte and Seawright 2008; Lawless 2012; Lawless and Fox 2005; Lawless and Fox 2010; Norris 1997; Norris and Lovenduski 1995; Wolbrecht and Campbell 2007) ‘women are significantly more likely than men to dismiss their qualifications, and significantly less likely than their male counterparts to express self-efficacy to enter the electoral arena’ (Fox and Lawless, 2011: 70). But, crucially women are also less likely than men to receive political encouragement to run for office (Fox and

Lawless, 2004).

But when women do run and are elected some recent research suggests that women politicians can have a role model effect on women in the general population, possibly generating a virtuous circle whereby politically active women raise the ambitions and interests of others. For example, researchers have shown that the gender gap in political knowledge in the United States is reduced to zero in states where women make up twenty percent or more of state legislators (Baldez 2001). Others have shown that in societies where women are better represented in leadership roles the gender gap in political interest is reversed (Tipping, Chanfreau and Tait 2012) or significantly narrowed (ACAS 2004) and in their research Christina Wolbrecht and David Campbell have found that where there are higher numbers of women in office adolescent girls and adult women are more likely to discuss and be interested in participating in politics (Wolbrecht and Campbell 2007) . They also find that ‘the more that women politicians are made visible by national news coverage, the more likely adolescent girls are to indicate an intention to be politically active’ (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006, 233). Campbell and Wolbrecht argue that the effect on adolescent girls operates through increased levels of political discussion, particularly within the family. Their findings sit comfortably with studies of the social logic of politics which show that the family is a key arena for political socialisation (Halsaa, Roseneil and Sümer 2012). Alan Zuckerman et al show that wives and mothers’ partisanship influences the whole family; a finding that runs counter to early studies of political behaviour, which assumed that women blindly followed the political persuasions of their husbands (Campbell et al. 1960). Although the transmission of political information between mothers and other family members is reciprocal, mothers sit at the centre of the network (Zuckerman et al 2007). This research on the family suggests that if mothers can be engaged in politics the potential rewards for society are magnified through their pivotal role in many families.

Another compelling piece of research makes use of a natural experiment, where leadership positions were reserved for women in Indian villages selected at random, Lori Beaman et al were able to demonstrate that young women’s educational attainment and career aspirations were raised in districts with a woman representative (Beaman et al. 2012).

Overall, it is clear that there is some evidence that women politicians can have a role model effect on other women, raising their levels of political interest and engagement. However, some argue that, rather than motivating women to participate in politics, higher levels of women's representation might be associated with positive evaluations of the political system itself (Espirito-Santo 2011; Rush 1997) and although the studies described here find that the presence of female politicians/candidates has an impact on, at least some indicators of, women's political engagement others find no effect (Mooney 2001; Outshoorn 1986).

Does it matter?

Does it matter if women are not equally represented in political elites? One can argue that it matters simply because such a massive over-representation of men is indicative of injustice (Phillips 1995). The argument from justice is powerful enough that any further evidence is not necessary to support the case for more women to be involved in key political decision-making roles. There are, however, sources of evidence which suggest that having more women politicians may improve the substantive representation of women. A simple elision between women's bodies and feminist minds should be avoided and men politicians can be and are critical actors advocating for women's rights (Celis and Childs 2011; Celis et al. 2008), but there is research to suggest that on average, and on some issues, women politicians' views are closer to women in the electorate than men politicians (Campbell, Childs and Lovenduski 2010; Lovenduski and Norris 2003; Wängnerud 2000). In our study of British voters and election candidates Sarah Childs, Joni Lovenduski and I found that more women than men (across a variety of social groups) favour greater equality for women. In terms of attitudes to traditional gender roles, women representatives were more like women voters and male representatives were more like male voters. Such differences diminished but continued when we controlled for age and party. On average, male representatives, and would-be representatives, did not report the same level of hostility to traditional gender roles as women voters; hence, they may, on average, be less likely than women representatives to act for, or otherwise represent, women voters on the many issues affected by such roles. Others have shown that in some circumstances women politicians believe themselves to be acting for women (Childs 2004) and that they are

sometimes more likely to support initiatives designed to benefit women (Childs and Withey 2004).

What can be done?

Politics is a minority past-time for all sectors of society and we should remember that the differences between men and women are small and diminishing (gender overlap), but there are some differences (gender gap).

Which came first the woman politician or the woman activist? There is some evidence of role model effects whereby the visibility of women politicians can stimulate more women to be interested in politics, potentially creating a virtuous circle. In order to maximize the potential for role model effects political parties must ensure that women politicians are given senior roles and are not sidelined in media coverage, especially of election campaigns. Women politicians themselves can do a great deal by participating in mentoring schemes and political education programmes for women. It is important to continue to create and maintain women only or majority women political spaces as these can provide a vital arena for women to develop confidence in their abilities and a peer network. Research shows that women are significantly less likely than men to receive political encouragement to run for office (Fox and Lawless, 2004: 275) and they are less likely to think they are qualified. Therefore political parties should focus on actively recruiting women from outside of political parties. Furthermore parties may need to focus (although not exclusively) on the issues and topics that particularly motivate women, such as education, healthcare, children, pensions, caring for the elderly and partisan debate should sometimes be over-ridden to show that politics can be about consensus as well as conflict.

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