Political Participation of Women in Elections: A Brief Analysis in Political Life

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ABSTRACT

The study of political participation has traditionally been considered as central to the analysis of political processes and, especially, of democratic political systems. Recent decades have witnessed growing demands for the empowerment of women and in political participation. Feminist theorists suggest that the presence of women leaders facilitates the articulation of different perspectives on political issues, where elected representatives are not just 'standing as' women but also 'acting for' women as a group. There is no consensus around which is the most adequate level of citizen participation (men or women) in the government of the polity for a good functioning of democracy. Women as one of the key values of democratic polities, so that all major social cleavages have a voice in the policymaking process, whether the politically relevant groups are defined by gender, ethnicity, region, socioeconomic status, age, or education. Thus, this paper tries to explain that those women who can mobilize themselves are more likely participate in political activities such as involve in campaigning week, demonstration, voting and even as candidate in elections .

Keywords: Women, Politics, Political Participation, Democracy, Elections

INTRODUCTION

Participation in electoral processes involves much more than just voting. Political participation derives from the freedom to speak out, assemble and associate; the ability to take part in the conduct of public affairs; and the opportunity to register as a candidate, to campaign, to be elected and to hold office at all levels of government. Under international standards, men and women have an equal right to participate fully in all aspects of the political process. In practice, however, it is often harder for women to exercise this right.

Recent decades have witnessed growing demands for the inclusion and empowerment of women and minorities in elected office. Feminist theorists suggest that the presence of women leaders facilitates the articulation of different perspectives on political issues, where elected representatives are not just =standing asø women but also =acting forø women as a group. If so, then the under-representation of women in parliament may have important consequences for the public policy agenda and for the articulation of womenøs interests, as well as for the legitimacy of democratic bodies. Inclusiveness is widely regarded as one of the key values of democratic polities, so that all major social cleavages have a voice in the policymaking process, whether the politically relevant groups are defined by gender, ethnicity, region, socioeconomic status, age, or education.

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In the organized sector, where there is greater job security, the proportion of women employed to total employment was only 16 percent in 1996 up from 11 percent in 1961 (Gopalan and Shiva 2000). Given that few women are in the workforce, women's participation in political life is fairly limited. While a large enough proportion of women turn out to vote and the gender gap in turnout has dropped to the single digits in the 1990s from almost 20 percent in 1971, women still are not well represented in political life that requires them to be active in the public sphere ó such as membership in Parliament and in State Legislative Assemblies.

THEORIES ANDS CONCEPTS OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN

<u>Political participation of Women</u>

Men and women also participate differently in political life. The World Values Survey (WVS) in 2005-2006 asked whether a respondent had taken part in political activities such as signing a petition, or taking part in a demonstration. Responses in the affirmative to these three questions were coded such that if a respondent had undertaken even one of these activities the respondent was considered to have participated in politics. Those who did not take part in any of the activities were classified as non-participants. In not all nations, however, do men and women participate at differential rates. In the US, Canada, Sweden, Argentina, South Korea, Israel, Tanzania, Vietnam and Egypt the differences between men and women's participation rates were not significant. Malaysian women were granted the right to vote and to stand for election at the same time as men i.e. in 1957; and women were also elected to parliament at the same time as men in 1959. However in year 2005, women in government at ministerial level make up only 9.1 percent of the total number; i.e. with 9.1 percent at the lower house and 25.7 percent at the upper house or Senate. While at the state assembly level only 6 percent are women members; while 11.6 percent of the 3,157 local council members are women.

International agencies, governments, parties and groups concerned with increasing the representation of women and minorities have advocated a range of initiatives designed to break through the barriers in elected office. The evidence presented in this study provides further confirmation that the basic type of electoral system influences the inclusiveness of elected bodies (Norris 1999; Putnam and Pharr 2000; and Gyimah-Boadi, 2004). Women are generally more successful in being nominated and elected under proportional electoral systems than under combined or majoritarian systems. This electoral incentive is absent among local selectors with single member districts in majoritarian elections, where each local party can choose an individual candidate without any collective responsibility for balancing the social profile of the parliamentary party at national level.

A series of studies since the mid-1980s have confirmed that more women have usually been elected to parliament under party list proportional representation (PR) than under majoritarian electoral systems (Norris, 1985). This pattern holds both within established democracies and also across a broader range of developing societies worldwide. Within proportionalelectoral systems, the mean district magnitude has commonly been found to bea particularly important factor, with more women usually elected from systemsusing large multimember constituencies.

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The World Values Survey (2005-2006) does not offer the same set of questions to assess a womanøs role outside the household as the survey of women in India. It does, however, ask respondents how often they met their friends. It can be assumed that those women who meet their friends more often are more likely to have a life independent of the household than those who do not. This variable ó meeting with friends becomes the key independent variable in the analysis and if women who have a life outside of the household are more interested in politics and more politically active this variable should be significant even when controlling for other factors that could influence whether a female respondents is interested in politics and politically active. In addition to the national origin of the respondent other demographic factors too could influence participation. It is well acknowledged that more educated women, those who are employed, women of higher social standing (social class), and urban women are more likely to be interested in politics as well as more active. Similarly, those women who belong to any secondary association could be expected to be more active politically while housewives should be less politically active.

Political parties

Political theory and contemporary publics agree that political parties are a necessary and important component of the democratic process. The positive contribution of political parties is indisputable, and democracy without parties is still difficult to imagine. At the same time, citizens today express widespread skepticism about political parties as institutions and the process of representative government based on political parties. Gabor Toka (1992; cf Norris, 1999) is more cautious: "There are many hypotheses about the relations between party fragmentation, ideological polarization, representation and accountability. The exception of the accountability under certain coalition governments theme, these hypotheses rather invite secondary analysis of available longitudinal data than original data collection.

Based on reports by Norris (1999) points to "the lack of adequate and cross-nationally comparable data on citizen's attitudes towards political parties." He suggests that "it is necessary to distinguish two dimensions of anti-party sentiment on the mass level: a) the rejection of existing parties without a principled rejection of party as actor in the political process; b) generalized rejection of party as actor in the political process."

Modern democratic theorists of all stripes embrace parties as institutions that organize electoral competition, aggregate disparate social interests, mediate social conflict, increase voter rationality, enlarge the electorate through mobilization, link people to their government, and constrain those in positions of power. In emerging democracies, it is the political parties that play an instrumental role in consolidating the new regimes (Dix 1984).

In recent decades, parties have declined as other institutions have taken over many of their traditional functions (Ware 1985; and Dalton 1984). Interest groups press citizen concerns outside of party channels; the mass media inform and mobilize (Semetko, et al. 1991); party leaders have lost their grip over the slating of candidates (Katz 1986); centralized, capital intensive, professional campaign organizations have replaced decentralized, labor intensive, grassroots political organizations.

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SCENARIO IN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN ELECTIONS

In many countries the rights of women are enshrined in law, and there are no formal legal barriers to womenøs political participation in election processes. In practice, however, there are often formidable obstacles to womenøs active participation in politics. Does participation foster political equality? In some countries, for example, it might well be argued that all efforts should be devoted to achieving radical political reform, without which any attempts to answer the "small questions" about participation will be ineffective. Most citizens believe parties do not care what they think, are not sufficiently responsive to public interests, and cannot be trusted to represent the public's interests.

What motivates political participation of women? This question has endured in political science because participants in politics are more likely to have their interests represented and their grievances addressed, while the interests and grievances of non participants can be ignored. When docility extends to the vast majority of the public, governments have an easier time violating rights and disregarding public needs. Political scientists therefore seek to understand which circumstances rouse members of an otherwise docile public to action.

Many women are, however, still not aware of the reservations made for them in local elections. While a womanøs socio-economic status has a bearing on her interest in politics and political activity the impact of a womanøs position in the household cannot be denied. Whether a woman can negotiate space for herself independent of the household is an important determinant of whether she is an active participant in politics or not. This claim highlights the fact that political participation is a public act and that for women to be equal participants in the public arena they need to be able to step outside the household-a sphere of male dominance in many parts of the world.

Unequal participation by women and men in electoral politics is evident in the predominance of men among parliamentarians, cabinet ministers, and heads of government. In most countries (although not all) women and men have equal rights to vote and to stand for electoral office. Why, then, are they so few among elected representatives? According to Norris (1999), the main obstacles stem from political structures, processes and parties such as lack of political party support for female candidates, particularly limited financial support and limited access to political networks;   Lack of coordination and networks of women MPs and womenøs groups with other public organizations such as trade unions, possibly due to lack of awareness of the potential benefits or lack of financial resources for such links; Male-oriented norms and structures that mitigate against womenøs public participation, including parliamentary schedules that are difficult to reconcile with parental and family responsibilities;   Insufficient mobilization of media support; Lack of leadership-oriented training and education for women;   Electoral systems that are not conducive to womenøs political participation, such as õfirst past the postö rather than proportional representation systems. Other obstacles to womenøs participation include: inadequate financial resources, illiteracy and limited access to education, the double burden of family and work responsibilities, ideologies or cultural patterns opposing womenøs participation in public life, and unsupportive attitudes on the part of the media. Women may face difficulties securing the support of other women.

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It is not always just men who are unconvinced of women's right to participate. Equal rights to vote that exist in law can also be denied in practice. For example, in some countries, women's ability to exercise the vote may be restricted by hostility among male community leaders and officials to women's participation. Women may face cultural constraints to public contact between women and men or other limits on their mobility. As well there may be practical constraints that limit women's ability to vote ó for example, women may not have the time required to stand in line on election day or participate in campaign discussions. However, many of the barriers to equal participation in the political process reflect more general limits on women's opportunities. An assessment of where action is required to achieve progress in women's participation in the political process.

In many parts of the world, however, the public space is still inhabited and dominated by men. For instance, political demonstrations in many parts of the world are still the domain of men as are legislatures. Women do not have a place in the public space. For women to be politically active they need to be in the public arena. For this, women need to be able to õstep out of the household.ö Women must have an existence autonomous of the household - households, which Hartmann (1981) noted (perhaps echoing Aristotle), are still the sphere of male dominance. As long as women are confined to the home and they do not have an identity independent of the household their levels of political participation will necessarily be lower than those of men because they cannot be in the public space. Or, to develop a theory of political participation then, Okin (1998), we need to see the place inside and outside of women in the family.

Burns et.al (2001) find that men indeed do spend more time on paid work and wives more on housework but both men and women have similar amounts of free time and that õleisure has no systematic impact on political participationö either by men or women. Another reason for why women are not politically active is that they are actively discriminated against ó legally or otherwise. The fact that women are quite expressive about equality raises doubts about theories that women are not aware of their rights and buy into the dominant male social and political discourse.

THE WAY WOMEN CAN BE ACTIVE IN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Since political parties often tend to be more open to nominating women as candidates for local elections, women may find it easier to start at this level and use it as a stepping stone to national office as follows;

i) Political party laws.

Most countries have a law regulating how political parties must be organized and registered and dictating how they must operate. The operational provisions of the political party law can be extremely important in establishing the framework for women's political participation.

ii) Promoting women's participation in proportional systems.

One of the most effective ways to ensure women are elected to office is to require that party candidate lists be gender balanced or include a certain proportion of women. This is a legal obligation in many countries.

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iii) Promoting women's participation in majority systems.

In majority systems, the options for advancing women's participation as candidates may be more limited, but there are still a number of useful steps that might be taken. For example, political party laws could stipulate that a certain number or proportion of party candidates in elections at various levels must be women, though this would be harder to implement fairly in majority systems than in proportional systems.

iv) Women's wings.

In many countries, political parties have established special wings for women that can contribute to their advancement. This mechanism can provide an avenue for women to become active, learn political skills, and develop networks within the party. Women's wings can often influence party positions, especially on issues of special concern to women. They are most effective when linked directly to party leadership and decision-making bodies; when this is not the case, women's wings may lead to the compartmentalization or marginalization of women in the party.

v) Platforms.

Another indication of the party's commitment to the advancement of women is its platform. By addressing gender equality and other issues of special concern to women, parties can increase their relevance to women voters and provide a greater incentive for women to become involved in the political process. In post-conflict countries, parties might encourage women's participation by taking gender sensitive positions on such issues as refugees and displaced persons, family reunification, violence against women, female unemployment, housing, education, and social issues such as family planning and reproductive health.

vi) Non-governmental organizations

More broadly, non-governmental organizations, including women's, human rights and community groups, labor unions, and other civil society institutions, can contribute in various ways to the advancement of women's political participation. Priorities may include identifying women to stand as candidates, providing training on dealing with the media and other issues, developing networks to advance women in politics

vii) Media

The media, and particularly electronic media, play a crucial role in shaping voter interest in and attitudes about an election. The way the media portray women, how they deal with issues of special concern to women, and whether they convey effectual voter education messages can have a major impact on women's participation in an election. This is true in all elections, including those held in post-conflict countries.

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CONCLUSION

Women's membership in all political parties is still in the sidelines and not in the mainstream party. Women wings in political parties remain secondary to men despite them fulfilling crucial grass roots role during the campaigning period of each general election. While men in the party's youth wings can 'climb up' the party hierarchy into the mainstream party, women seems to be constrained within their respective wings perpetually playing a supportive and secondary role to their male counterparts. There still exists a significant gender gap or gender inequality both including Malaysia when one reviews all the areas of modern life. Even though women in Malaysia have achieved considerable progress in the two areas of basic human rights-education and health, they have not made much headway in terms of economic participation and political empowerment in their own society. Thus, our government should provide the right place for women actively participate in politics. Not only as supporters or involve in campaign week but as the important person as MP's (Members of Parliament) or member in State Legislative Committee as well.

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