

Westminster Women: the Politics of Presence

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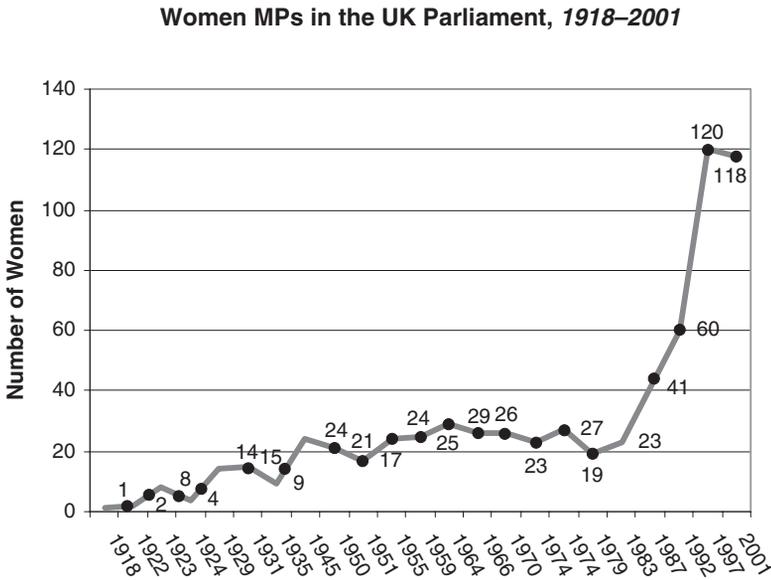
The entry of the 1997 cohort of Labour women into public life offers a test case of whether, and under what conditions, women politicians have the capacity to ‘make a substantive difference’. We outline the theory of the politics of presence and discuss how to operationalise this in a testable model. We use the British Representation Study survey of 1,000 national politicians (including parliamentary candidates and elected Members of Parliament) conducted in the 2001 general election. The analysis centres on the impact of gender on five scales measuring attitudes and values on issues that commonly divide British party politics.

Once we control for party, there are no significant differences among women and men politicians across the value scales concerning the free market economy, Europe, and moral traditionalism. Yet on the values most directly related to women’s interests – namely the affirmative action and the gender equality scales – women and men politicians differ significantly within each party, even after controlling for other common social background variables that explain attitudes, such as their age, education, and income. The conclusion considers why these findings matter for the composition of parliament, the public policy agenda and for women’s roles as political leaders.

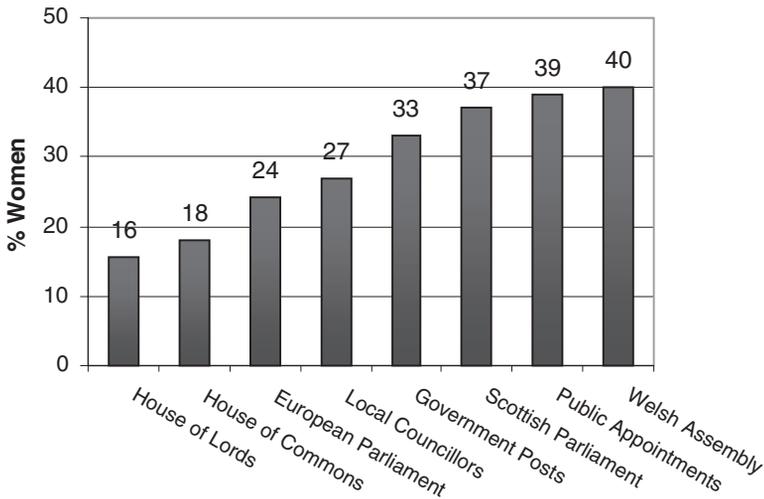
The rising tide of women in elected office has raised expectations about their role as political leaders. Some hope, and others fear, that this development could alter the predominant political culture, the policy agenda, and the representation of women’s interests in public life. This growth has occurred in many democracies and it is exemplified by dramatic developments at Westminster where the June 1997 election saw the entry of 120 women members into the UK House of Commons (18 per cent), double the number elected in 1992. This trend forms part of a larger phenomenon evident in the United Kingdom during the late-1990s where growing numbers of women entered other legislative bodies, thereby becoming 37 percent of the Scottish Parliament and 40 percent of the Welsh Assembly, 24 percent of British MEPs in the European parliament, 16 percent of the House of Lords, and 27 percent of local councilors (see Figure 1). The change experienced in Britain represents part of a larger shift in cultural attitudes towards the political and social roles of women that has been sweeping through many postindustrial societies (Norris and Inglehart, 2003).

What are the political consequences that flow from this development? And, in particular, did the entry of a substantial number of women MPs in the 1997 election, and their subsequent re-election in 2001, alter the predominant culture at West-

Figure 1: Women in Public Office, UK



% Women in different kinds of Public Office in the UK, January 2000



minster? This article compares survey evidence drawn from a representative sample of almost 1,000 national politicians in Britain (including parliamentary candidates and elected members) to examine whether women leaders display distinctive attitudes and values which have the capacity to make a substantive difference

for women's interests. The first part briefly explains the theoretical framework based on the politics of presence and outlines a model to test it empirically. Three sources of evidence are available to examine the theoretical claims. We argue that, given the serious constraints on back bench activities at Westminster, *behavioural* measures, such as roll-call data based on legislative voting rebellions, provide an unduly limited yardstick for examining the capacity of women politicians to offer a distinctive contribution to politics. *Self-reported* measures taken at face value without independent verification, such as interviews where women politicians claim to act for women, are equally suspect given the electoral self-interest embodied in such claims. In contrast *cultural* measures provide the most suitable, systematic and reliable evidence, where any gender differences in attitudes and values can be regarded as a *necessary*, although not *sufficient*, condition for women representatives to act for women as a group. If women and men MPs share similar attitudes and values, then it seems unlikely that the election of more women backbenchers has the potential to make any sort of substantive policy difference, whether through legislative votes, parliamentary activities, or influencing the policy process behind the scenes. We theorise that the values of women and men politicians can be expected to prove similar on many traditional left-right issues that have long divided British party politics, but that they can be expected to display the most significant contrasts towards the key issues that most directly affect women's ability to lead an independent life. The second part describes the data and measures, including the British Representation Study survey of 1,000 candidates and members conducted in the 2001 general election. The third part examines the evidence for gender differences concerning five scales measuring attitudes and values that commonly divide British party politics. The results confirm that once we control for party, there are no significant differences among women and men leaders across the value scales measuring support for the Free Market economy, for European Integration, and for Traditional Moral values. Yet on the values and attitudes that are most closely related to women's autonomy – namely the Affirmative Action and the Gender Equality scales – women and men express significantly different values within each party. This pattern persists even after controlling for other social variables that commonly influence attitudes, such as age, education and income. The conclusion summarises the main findings and considers why and under what conditions they may have important consequences.

Theoretical Framework

The flourishing and extensive literature on women and public office has developed two central strands. The first focuses on '*descriptive* representation', seeking to identify the reasons why so few women are elected to legislative bodies and the importance of barriers such as the electoral system, the role of party recruitment processes, and the resources and motivation that women bring to the pursuit of elected office (see Darcy *et al.*, 1994; Lovenduski and Norris, 1993, 1996; Norris and Lovenduski, 1995). Descriptive representation can be regarded as intrinsically valuable, for example Mansbridge (1999) argues that for African-Americans and for women, both historically disadvantaged social groups, the entry of representatives into public office improves the quality of group deliberations, increases a sense of democratic legitimacy, and develops leadership capacity. The second approach

pursues the related question of whether, if elected, women will 'make a difference' in legislative life and political leadership, or if they will offer '*substantive*' representation of women.¹ Feminist theorists suggest that the presence of women in the House of Commons offers possibilities that women are not just 'standing as' women but also 'acting for' women as a group (Phillips, 1995; Lovenduski, 1997). This argument is commonly heard when it is assumed that, due to their particular life-experiences in the home, workplace and public sphere, women politicians prioritise and express different types of values, attitudes, and policy priorities, such as greater concern about childcare, health or education, or a less conflictual and more collaborative political style.² Although these issues are of long-standing theoretical interest, in Britain until recently there have been so few women serving in most levels of public office that it seemed premature to ask what impact they may have on the policy process. The changing situation during the 1990s, however, calls for these issues to be re-examined.

How might such a distinctive contribution be identified and tested? The theoretical framework in this study draws on accounts of 'the politics of presence' developed by Phillips (1995, 1998). Acknowledging that mechanisms of accountability (the politics of ideas) are necessary to representative democracy, Phillips argues that women have a distinctive group identity based upon shared common interests on issues such as abortion, childcare or equal opportunities in education and the labour force. There is nothing particularly novel about these type of claims, after all the analogy can be drawn with many other groups which have sought to secure legislative representation within established or separate parties to articulate and defend their interests. Such a process is exemplified in the early twentieth century by the creation of the British Labour Party by trade unions to advance collective labour organisations and the legal right to strike (Pelling, 1968). Acknowledging that men and women have complex sets of interests that both diverge and overlap, and that women as a group are far from monolithic, Phillips points out that '... the variety of women's interests does not refute the claim that interests are gendered. ... The argument from interest does not depend on establishing a unified interest of all women: it depends, rather, on establishing a difference between the interests of women and men' (Phillips, 1995, p. 68). If, however, women are divided by predominant crosscutting cleavages, such as those of social class, region, ethnicity or religion, and by ideological divisions between left and right, then these factors may over-ride any common or shared interests associated with gender. Indeed, the classic account of the evolution and consolidation of parties in Western Europe, by Lipset and Rokkan (1967), argued that other cleavages in the electorate were the primary building blocks of party competition – including those dividing the core and periphery regions, Catholics and Protestants, and workers and the bourgeoisie. Lipset and Rokkan assumed that any residual differences between women and men were subsumed under these primary social cleavages.

Before we can test the claims of the politics of presence thesis it is necessary to establish a clear definition of 'women's interests'. Although this concept is common, it remains controversial in feminist scholarship. As Wängnerud notes, problems include the relationship between 'objective' and 'subjective' interests, as well as the relationship between gender and other social divisions like race and

class (Wängnerud, 2000, p. 68). Defined broadly, if 'women's interests' are understood to include all political issues where women and men may disagree, for example, in their attitudes towards the deployment of armed forces, the protection of the environment, or the desirability of a strong and effective welfare safety net, then it becomes unclear how to define the boundaries of 'women's interests'. Instead it seems preferable to adopt a strong but narrower definition of women's interests since such a formulation will improve its possibilities for effective theorising and measurement. In line with Wängnerud (2000, p. 70), we define women's shared interests to be in those policies that increase their autonomy. The recognition of such interests is a *process* of politicisation that can be treated as a number of steps in which (1) women are recognised as a social category, that is the gender neutrality of politics is contested; (2) the inequalities of power between the sexes are acknowledged; and, (3) policies to increase the autonomy of women are made. In her analysis of interview data on successive cohorts of Swedish legislators, Wängnerud shows how each step influences the political process and concludes that women's presence in the Riksdag has brought about a shift of emphasis whereby women's interests have become more central in politics. She found differences in attitudes between women and men across a wide range of issues and showed how these differences provoke political changes that lead to an increased legislative sensitivity to women's interests by all politicians. Wängnerud shows that the articulation and mobilisation of such interests in the Riksdag is the work of women politicians (Wängnerud, 2000).

We recognise that the effects of women's presence in politics do not happen automatically but exist and become explicit under certain conditions. Instructive here is the work of Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977) on gender relations within industrial corporations. Kanter's argument is that the size of a minority matters. *Uniform* groups contain only men or only women. *Skewed* groups contain a large imbalance of men or women, up to about 15 percent of the minority group. *Tilted* groups contain about 15–40 percent of the opposite sex. Lastly, *balanced* groups contain 40–50 percent of each sex. Kanter suggests that once a group reaches a certain size – somewhere in the tilted group range – the minority starts to assert itself and from this assertion there eventually follows a transformation of the institutional culture. This argument implies that rather than steady evolution, there is a critical 'tipping point' that depends upon numbers. When a group remains a small minority within a larger society its members are tokens who will seek to adapt to their surroundings, conforming to the predominant rules of the game. They will not act to increase the size of their group. If anything their various available strategies ('queen bee', assimilation, and so on) will tend to keep the number of tokens appropriately and conveniently small. Once the group reaches a certain size, however, their available strategies change and lead to a qualitative shift in the nature of group interactions, as the minority starts to assert itself and thereby transform the institutional culture, norms and values. Kanter fails to explain why change in the relative numbers of women and men leads to institutional, cultural or policy change. Such effects are not a simple result of increasing numbers, they are an effect of the processes of mobilisation that are made possible by the presence of women in a traditionally masculine institution. In the language of feminist scholarship it is an effect of gender, defined as the socially ascribed characteristics of women and men.

Even so, we should not expect an increase in the presence of women politicians to bring immediate change. In a critical assessment of Kanter's argument, Janice Yoder drew attention to the gendered processes that take place as the balance between the numbers of women and men change. Where women are in gender-inappropriate occupations, as defined by traditional norms, then an increase in their numbers may generate a backlash. When this occurs, it makes it difficult for women to influence the wider society or organisation, at least initially (Yoder, 1991, see also Dahlerup, 1988). Taken together, this body of work suggests that to understand what happens when the numbers of women rises, it is necessary to understand under what conditions change can be expected to occur and how institutional effects will distort or delay this process.

Measures, Data and Methods

In sum, 'presence' theory highlights gendered interests as the cause of the political change that occurs when women enter a legislature. If women and men politicians differ in their underlying interests, then when parliaments include more women politicians this could contribute towards a transformation in the institutional culture, political discourse, and policy agenda. The expectations are explicit in Clare Short's claims: 'As more women come into the Commons, the culture will change, the agenda of politics will broaden, and the institution itself will be transformed' (quoted in McDougal, 1998). The entry of more women politicians into the House of Commons following the 1997 election generated high expectations of what they could achieve. Are such expectations likely to be met? The 'presence' argument suggest that, beyond a certain threshold, as the numbers of women change, so also will other elements of the legislature because men and women bring different interests to politics. Yet the precise consequences are left implicit, albeit with some agreement about what they *might* be.

There are at least three alternative ways in which any latent gender 'difference' among politicians could be expressed and measured, namely through (i) the legislative voting record of MPs; (ii) the roles and activities of backbenchers; and (iii) the underlying cultural attitudes and ideological values of politicians.

MPs' Legislative Voting Record

The first and strongest measure of political impact could be if women and men MPs differed in their voting record on key bills, for example if women were more likely to rebel against Labour initiatives to cut back on welfare or childcare benefits. This approach has often been used in the USA, where gender differences have been established in studies examining roll call data in Congress and state houses (Vega and Firestone, 1995; Dolan, 1997; Swers 1998). This yardstick was also commonly used to evaluate the 1997 cohort of women MPs by the British press. As a result, within a few months of their entry in 1997, popular commentary in the media often adopted a critical and sceptical tone, suggesting that initial hopes for women as agents of change failed to be realised (Perkins, 1999). Far from altering parliament, 'Blair's Babes', as they were quickly dubbed by the tabloids, appeared more quiescent towards the leadership, less willing to rebel, and therefore unlikely

to make a distinctive contribution to the legislative agenda (Cowley and Childs, 2001; Thomson, 1999). Criticism was particularly strong in the 1997 Parliament when Labour cuts in benefits for lone mothers were more likely to be supported by women than men MPs. Research by Phillip Cowley and Sarah Childs confirmed that Labour women MPs were slightly less likely to rebel than men although these gender differences diminished to near insignificance after controls for cohort of entry were introduced (Cowley and Childs, forthcoming). Press criticism of the newly elected Labour women was sustained and frequently vicious. It was also reflected in comments by MPs on both sides of the house. Thus Brian Sedgemore, Labour member for Hackney South and Shoreditch, famously referred to the new Labour women MPs as 'Stepford Wives' (*The Observer*, 1 April 2001) while the leader of the Conservatives, Iain Duncan Smith, accused them of being second rate politicians (*Financial Times*, 4 August 2001). The stigma of 'Blairs Babes' continued throughout and beyond the life of the parliament elected in 1997.

Roll call analysis is perhaps better suited to the US Congress. In European parliamentary democracies where party constraints on back bench MPs are common (Bowler *et al.*, 1999) legislative votes are a limited and too strict test of political effectiveness. The ability of elected members to rebel on most legislative votes at Westminster remains highly constrained, due to the sanctions of strict discipline by party whips, especially during an era of strong parliamentary management by the governing party. 'Free' votes, such as moral issues on which party managers give no instructions to their backbenchers, provide an exception, but these issues remain atypical of Westminster politics, and high levels of party discipline and cohesion persist even when the party whips are 'off' (Cowley and Stuart, 1997). British MPs who commonly rebel on whipped votes can face severe penalties in terms of lack of ministerial advancement, or even loss of further nomination, effectively ending their political careers (Norton, 1993). As a result, in systems of party government we should expect the political expression of any potential differences among women and men members of parliament to be inhibited by the institutional context.

MPs' Political Roles and Activities

The second, weaker claim is that the parliamentary activities of back bench women MPs could still differ in many other regards beyond legislative votes, such as in the priority that they give towards constituency service (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995), or in their style of politics in committee work, parliamentary debates, Private Members Bills, or Early Day Motions. American research, for example, has often found that women in Congress and state houses promote women's issues through lobbying, committee work and bill sponsorship (Tamerius, 1995) as well as finding that women and men differ in their rhetorical style during committee hearing debates (Kathlene, 1994; Rosenthal, 1997). The literature in the USA suggests that women officeholders give greater attention than their male colleagues of the same party to women's rights, as well as to concerns reflecting women's traditional roles as caregivers in the family and society (Carroll, 2001). Similar patterns have been established in the Nordic states, where women leaders have raised distinctive concerns, through parliamentary questions and debates (Karvonen and Selle, 1995; Skjeie, 1993, Bergqvist, 2000), as well as affecting the agenda-setting process on issues like day-care coverage (Bratton and Ray, 2002). Elsewhere Georgia Duerst-

Lahti and Rita Mae Kelly (1995) provide evidence of different leadership styles and practices by male and female legislators in the USA. In the Australian parliament women representatives have also been found to bring a distinctive contribution to parliamentary debates on issues such as euthanasia (Broughton and Palmieri, 1999). Yet while some studies suggest that women do make a distinct contribution to the policy agenda in legislatures elsewhere, such as in North America, Western Europe and Scandinavia, the evidence remains under debate (see, for example, discussions in Thomas, 1994; Karvonen and Selle, 1996; Tremblay, 1998; Carroll, 2001; Reingold, 2000).

In Britain, anecdotal reports suggest that women MPs work effectively on behalf of women behind the scenes, for example in influencing party policies or articulating women's concerns in discussion with ministers (Lovenduski, 2001). In discussions women MPs also commonly make similar claims (Ross, 2002). For example, interviews with half the newly elected Labour women MPs in 1997 found that two-thirds identified as feminists and expressed support for the values of women's autonomy and equality, suggesting that there might be the potential for the articulation of a distinctive voice in parliament (Childs, 2001a, 2001b). Yet without independent verification it is difficult to evaluate the validity of self-reported claims. Such claims cannot simply be accepted at face value, given that members may have an interest in making such arguments when seeking to maximise their electoral support. Nevertheless this research strengthens our scepticism about the analysis of MPs' voting records. Critics of the conformity of 'Blair's Babes' use a yardstick that may well prove too narrow to monitor the full range of legislative activities and back bench roles where men and women may differ at Westminster.

Political Attitudes and Values

Lastly, even if we assume that there are no *behavioural* differences because the parliamentary votes of women MPs conform to the bidding of party whips, and if women and men backbenchers adopt similar legislative roles and activities in the House of Commons, the third claim that the underlying attitudes and values of women and men politicians could still differ in some important regards may hold. After all an extensive body of literature has established that women legislators in America commonly express slightly more liberal attitudes across a range of social and economic issues, after controlling for their type of party and district (Thomas, 1994; Duerst-Lahti and Kelly, 1995; Thomas and Wilcox, 1998; Carroll, 2001). Could such findings be replicated at Westminster? In the UK parliament the existence of strong party discipline and the predominant parliamentary culture might make it difficult for women backbenchers to articulate a distinctive set of perspectives and interests, as a minority, although they may differ substantially from men members on many core attitudes and values, especially on issues concerning women's interests. Yet on the other hand, if women and men MPs share similar attitudes and values, due to either the selection process in parties or to the socialisation process at Westminster, then it seems unlikely that women backbenchers will be motivated to make a substantive policy difference, whether through legislative votes, parliamentary activities, or influencing the policy process behind the scenes. Attitudinal differences can therefore be regarded as a *necessary* although not *sufficient* condition for women representatives to act for women as a group.

The British Representation Survey, 2001

To measure attitudinal differences, this study analyses a representative sample of national politicians (including British parliamentary candidates and elected Members of Parliament). Evidence is drawn from the 2001 British Representation Studies (BRS), a mail survey sent to all parliamentary candidates and MPs standing in the British general election for all parties with parliamentary representation.

In early spring 2001, before the official campaign got underway, the BRS was mailed to 1,859 candidates selected by the main British parties (excluding the Greens, BNP, UK Independence party, and other minor parties or independent candidates without parliamentary representation). In total 1085 politicians had replied by the end of June 2001, representing a response rate of over 58 percent (for full details and the questionnaires see www.pippanorris.com). Although the response rate was (as usual) higher among parliamentary candidates than MPs, the study includes about one third of the current House of Commons, and it is broadly representative by party. The results can be compared with other surveys in this series, the 1997 British Representation Study (N=999), and the 1992 British Candidate Study (N=1658) (for full methodological details of previous research see Norris and Lovenduski (1995)). Initial analysis of the results in terms of patterns of party ideology is available elsewhere (Norris and Lovenduski, 2001).

This study focuses on whether women and men politicians differ within each party in terms of a wide range of political attitudes and values. We monitored attitudes towards major economic, social and foreign policy issues commonly dividing British party politics, exemplified by attitudes towards Britain's membership of the European Union, support for values such as the redistribution of wealth, and support for traditional moral values, as well as towards explicitly gendered issues such as the use of affirmative action for women candidates and equal opportunities policy. The BRS contains multiple items measuring these values, with most derived from long-standing questions contained in the British Election Study. Principal component factor analysis with varimax rotation was used to examine the underlying ideological dimensions in responses to 26 items. The results in Table 1 show that the items fell into five dimensions that divided British politicians, reflecting attitudes towards the classic left-right dimension of support for the free market economy, affirmative action towards women, liberal gender equality, Europe, and moral traditionalism. The factor analysis accounted for over half (59 per cent) of the variance in attitudes towards these items. As shown in Table 1, each of the five scales proved consistent and reliable when tested using Cronbach's Alpha (all scoring 0.80 or above). The scales were standardised to 100-points for ease of interpretation, where low equals minimal support and high represents maximum support. We first compared the mean score on each scale by gender and party, testing the significance of any difference in the group means by ANOVA. We then employed OLS regression analysis to see whether the gender differences that we established on some scales persisted after controlling for other factors that commonly predict political attitudes, including age, income and education, as well as party and incumbency status.

Table 1: Factor Analysis of Political Attitudes Amongst all Candidates in 2001 BRS Survey

	Free Market Economy	Affirmative Action	Liberal Gender Equality	Europe	Moral Traditionalism
Big business benefits owners at worker's expense	0.822				
Ordinary people do not get their fair share of wealth	0.799				
Management will always try to get the better of employees	0.798				
There is one law for rich, one for poor	0.793				
Government should redistribute wealth	0.649				
All women short-lists		0.818			
Reserved seats for women		0.805			
Positive quotas/affirmative action for women		0.791			
Opinion on gender quotas		-0.665			
Financial support for women candidates		0.649			
Men better suited for politics than women			0.733		
Husbands' job is to earn money, wife's is at home			0.711		
Family life suffers when wife has full-time job			0.679		
Should Parliament have more women MPs?			-0.607		
Government should ensure that women have equal chances			-0.522		
Attempts to give equal opportunities to women			0.491		
Opinion on single European Currency				0.757	
Long-term policy on the EU should be...				0.742	
Feel about Britain's membership in the EU				0.741	
Schools should teach children to obey authority					0.617
Censorship is necessary to uphold moral standards					0.611
The law should be obeyed even if wrong					0.584
Young people lack respect for traditional values					0.584
People who break law should be given stiffer sentences					0.546
Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay				-0.428	0.409
% Variance explained	35.6	8.8	7.2	5.1	4.2
Cronbach's Alpha for each scale	0.90	0.86	0.80	0.87	0.80

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. Rotation converged in 7 iterations. Coefficients less than .40 were excluded. Cronbach's Alpha was used to test the reliability of each of the scales.

Source: British Representation Study 2001 (N=999).

Results and Analysis

Differences in the mean scores on these scales among women and men within each party are shown in Table 2. The results show that once we control for party, there are almost no significant differences in the values of women and men leaders concerning the core scales measuring support for free market left-right economic values, attitudes towards Britain's role in the European Union, and moral traditionalism. On all these values women and men politicians displayed common agreement within each party. The only exception concerns the economic values of Labour women that were significantly more moderate or centrist than their male colleagues. In all these regards, contrary to some of the evidence in studies of gender differences in the American Congress and state houses (Vega and Firestone, 1995; Dolan, 1997; Swers, 1998), there is no support for the stronger claims that women leaders in British politics are consistently more liberal or more conservative than men towards the traditional left-right issues such as crime, moral censorship, or the redistribution of income that have long divided party politics at Westminster. Nor are women politicians in each party significantly more or less

Table 2: Mean Scores on the Value Scales by Party and Gender

PARTY	Gender and (N)		Pro-free market economy scale	Pro-affirmative action scale	Pro-liberal gender equality scale	Pro-European scale	Pro-moral Traditionalism scale
Con	Men	194	78	9	66	29	57
	Women	38	80	14	75	28	58
	Eta		0.07	0.16***	0.23***	0.03	0.02
Lab	Men	165	40	34	85	54	41
	Women	58	45	50	90	53	38
	Eta		0.17***	0.40***	0.17**	0.05	0.09
L. Dem	Men	189	44	25	82	61	38
	Women	55	45	36	87	62	37
	Eta		0.04	0.28***	0.17***	0.02	0.05
Nat	Men	75	38	28	81	58	36
	Women	14	38	35	89	61	36
	Eta		0.01	0.16	0.26**	0.08	0.02

*Note: The figures represent the mean score on each of the value scales among 999 British politicians (parliamentary candidates and elected members) by party and gender, without any controls. See Table 1 for the items included in each of these scales. Each of the scales has been summed and standardized to 100 points for ease of interpretation, where low equals minimal support and high equals maximum support. The difference between groups is measured by ANOVA and the strength of association coefficient is Eta. Significance P. *** = 0.01 ** = 0.05, 0.10. Due to the smaller number of cases, 'Nat' combines members of the SNP and Plaid Cymru parties.*

Source: British Representation Study 2001.

'internationalist' in orientation towards the EU than men, another set of issues that generates sharp inter- and intra-party clashes. On all these issues, in Westminster politics it is party not gender that demarcates the predominant pattern of ideological beliefs and values. Moreover these findings suggest one possible reason helping to explain why women backbenchers proved less likely to rebel during the first Labour administration than their male colleagues (Cowley and Childs, 2001), namely their attitudes towards a range of social and economic values were fairly moderate and therefore largely in tune with the centrist position of the Blair government.

In contrast, when we measure attitudes and values directly relating to women's interests, we find significant differences between women and men politicians, and differences that are consistently found within each of the major parties. The results confirm that on the scales concerning support for equal opportunities and affirmative action there are strong and significant gender differences among Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat politicians, and the affirmative action scale also divides women and men nationalist politicians. The scale measuring attitudes towards affirmative action includes items where women candidates might be expected to have a direct interest in the outcome, including support for all women shortlists, the use of reserved seats, or the use of positive quotas to get more women candidates nominated. In some ways the gender difference within the Labour party is not surprising, it reflects long-standing debates in the party. But the fact that there is a significant gender gap on affirmative action within the Conservative party is both striking and unexpected, running directly counter to the official policy and mainstream ideology of the party. Conservative politicians prove least supportive of the use of affirmative action, but men are significantly less in favour than women politicians within the party. There are also consistent gender differences in each major party towards the scale measuring 'liberal' gender equality, reflecting issues such as more general support for equal opportunities policy for women, the items concerning men and women's roles in the family and workforce, and attitudes towards the suitability of women for public office. The comparison of means shows that male Conservatives prove least approving on this scale, while female Conservative politicians are positive; indeed on this scale they prove slightly more positive than male Labour politicians.

Of course these gender differences could be due to differences in other characteristics of men and women politicians. Tables 3 and 4 therefore use multivariate regression analysis to see whether these gender differences persist on these two scales even after controlling for factors that can be expected to shape political attitudes, such as the incumbency status, education, income, and the age of politicians. Among the different factors, age does prove important, with the younger generation of politicians more favourable towards gender equality, as might be expected. The contrasts between the Labour and Conservative parties remain important. Nevertheless the results confirm that the gender gap continues to be significantly related to the affirmative action and the liberal gender equality value scales even with these prior social controls, suggesting that the gap reflects deep-seated attitudinal differences between women and men leaders that cannot simply be explained away as due to their social background.

Table 3: Regression Model Predicting Support for Affirmative Action Values Scale

	Unstandardized coefficients B	Std. Error	Standardized coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	32.32	4.27		7.57	0.00
Woman politician (1/0)	10.75	1.18	0.23	9.11	0.00
Year of birth	-0.07	0.05	-0.04	-1.51	0.13
MP elected in 2001	1.18	0.68	0.05	1.73	0.08
Conservative	-18.57	1.95	-0.45	-9.54	0.00
Labour	7.43	1.97	0.17	3.78	0.00
Liberal Democrat	-2.31	1.90	-0.06	-1.22	0.22
Total household income	-0.04	0.22	-0.01	-0.19	0.85
Education	-0.29	0.75	-0.01	-0.38	0.70
Adjusted R ²	0.40				

Note: The OLS regression model has the standardized 100-point Affirmative Action value scale as the dependent variable. See Table 1 for the items included in this scale. The figures in bold are significant at the conventional level. Total household income, as a proxy for class, is measured using a 10-category scale. Education is measured on a 4-point scale from primary school to university or polytechnic degree. N=970 respondents.
Source: British Representation Study 2001.

Table 4: Regression Model Predicting Support for the Liberal Gender Equality Values Scale

	Unstandardized coefficients B	Std. error	Standardized coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	65.07	3.43		18.98	0.00
Woman politician (1/0)	6.55	0.94	0.18	6.94	0.00
year of birth	0.26	0.04	0.18	6.62	0.00
MP elected in 2001	0.08	0.55	0.00	0.15	0.88
Conservative	-14.80	1.56	-0.47	-9.46	0.00
Labour	3.89	1.58	0.12	2.46	0.01
Liberal Democrat	1.22	1.53	0.04	0.80	0.43
Total household income	0.42	0.18	0.07	2.34	0.02
Education	-0.33	0.61	-0.01	-0.55	0.58
Adjusted R ²	0.33				

Note: The OLS regression model has the standardized 100-point Liberal Gender Equality values scale as the dependent variable. See Table 1 for the items included in this scale. The figures in bold are significant at the conventional level. Total household income, as a proxy for class, is measured using a 10-category scale. Education is measured on a 4-point scale from primary school to university or polytechnic degree. N=980 respondents.
Source: British Representation Study 2001.

Conclusions and Implications

Westminster provides a suitable case to analyse how far the entry of more women into elected office has the capacity to make a substantive difference in the context of a European parliamentary democracy characterised by strong party discipline. The 1997 British general election saw the proportion of women MPs doubling overnight, from 9.2 to 18.2 percent of the House of Commons. In the governing Labour party, women became one quarter of the MPs. The 2001 election returned only 118 women MPs, a drop that is attributable to the abandonment of Labour's All-Women shortlist policy in half their target seats (Lovenduski, 2001). Nevertheless their substantial presence in Parliament makes women MPs more able to form alliances and act as a coherent force to affect the dominant culture of their institution, as well as being in a position to perform the 'critical' acts that Dahlerup (1988) argues are necessary to the feminisation of political institutions.

Yet despite extensive popular interest, and the publication of some qualitative studies, so far little previous research has presented systematic attitudinal evidence about the impact of women as legislators at Westminster. As argued earlier, the party discipline that characterises Westminster politics means that any evidence based on roll call voting provides an unduly limited and conservative indication of gender differences. Other behavioural measures, such as rhetorical analysis of debating styles or content analysis of Early Day Motions, so far unavailable, would provide alternative indicators of the existence of any gender differences at Westminster. Without independent verification, self-reported claims expressed during interviews that women politicians will prioritise women's interests and concerns more than men cannot be accepted at face value, any more than we would accept without demonstrable evidence any claims that Labour MPs speak for and defend the interests of the poor, or that Conservative MPs represent the business community.

Attitudinal differences concerning the issues that affect women's autonomy are the necessary but not sufficient condition for women to act 'for women'. The claim that increasing the numbers of women will bring qualitative change, or that descriptive representation will lead to substantive representation, depends upon the existence of underlying differences in the values and attitudes of the groups concerned. If women and men MPs are similar in these respects, then even if women gradually became the majority at Westminster, British parliamentary politics will continue in familiar ways. The public face of politics will become feminised, but the political culture and the substantive policy agenda will remain unchanged. Qualitative change will follow quantitative change only if female politicians differ significantly from men, for example if they give greater priority to public spending on education rather than defence, or if they raise more parliamentary questions about childcare than about Europe, or if they pay more attention to constituency service rather than parliamentary debate.

From the standpoint of feminist theory, the most important changes expected from women's entry into public office would be those that support the goals of increased women's autonomy by acknowledging and redressing gender inequality. Such change will follow from different values among women and men that were tested

using British Representation Study data. As expected, in the system of strong, cohesive and disciplined party government that prevails at Westminster, the evidence confirms that men and women's attitudes and values within each party coincide on many issues where party competition reflects the traditional left-right ideological spectrum. Legislative discipline and the culture of party unity may exaggerate agreement between women and men in each party. Thus, the entry of more women into Westminster cannot be expected to alter policies where the major parties remain deeply divided, such as Britain's role with the European Union, the traditional role of the state in the economy, or moral traditionalism. Yet this does not mean to say that the only impact of more women in parliament will be symbolic. The results indicate that within each party women and men politicians differ most significantly over issues that directly affect women's autonomy, that is, in their attitudes towards positive action and liberal sex equality policy.

The idea that increasing women's representation will change politics has public resonance. Much of the popular rhetoric supporting the selection of more women candidates prior to 1997 stressed that, while a clear case for positive discrimination in favour of women candidates could be made on the grounds of equity alone, in addition the entry of more women into Westminster would help to change policy priorities. The lack of any obvious evidence of radical change in terms of back bench voting rebellions led towards the popular view that the new women at Westminster were conformist and would be unlikely to lead towards radical change. This popular conclusion rests on exaggerated expectations and faulty premises. The results of this study suggest that the expansion of women's representation at Westminster does promise to alter the balance of interests, not on all economic and social issues, but most clearly on the issues of women's autonomy.

What are the implications of these findings? This study is limited to examining differences between women and men politicians in terms of their attitudes and values, which represents only one dimension of legislative life. The next step is to link attitudes to behaviour, a project that is being undertaken by the Study of Gender and Parliament Group. We plan to examine whether these value differences have important consequences for legislative behaviour, for example in terms of parliamentary questions, committee debates, Early Day Motions, perceptions of legislative roles, and back bench activities such as constituency work. Further research is needed on all these issues. Nevertheless, theoretically, there are at least four distinct ways in which the value differences that we have established between women and men politicians could potentially alter the UK House of Commons.

First these differences could generate changes in the political leadership. British MPs constitute the pool from which all elected government leaders are drawn, including members of the Cabinet and the opposition front benches. Changes in the composition of parliament may ultimately be expected to percolate upwards to the highest offices of state; studies have established that in Western Europe the proportion of women in parliament is one of the best predictors of the proportion of women in Cabinet (Davis, 1997; Siaroff, 2000).

Second, legislative priorities may alter. As discussed earlier, like many other parliaments in Western Europe, the UK House of Commons is characterised by strong party discipline, seriously limiting the autonomy of back bench MPs on whipped votes affecting government legislation. As Phillips has noted. 'If the field of poli-

tics has already been clearly demarcated, containing within it a comprehensive range of ideas and interests and concerns, it might not so much matter who does the work of representation. But if the range of ideas has been curtailed by orthodoxies that rendered alternatives invisible, there will be no satisfactory solution short of changing the people who represent and develop the ideas' (Phillips, 1995, p. 70). Women backbenchers can play an important role in developing and debating public policy, in shaping and revising legislation, in scrutinising the actions of government departments, and in linking citizens and government (Norton, 1993). The most obvious direct impact of gender differences in values may be in legislative activities where backbenchers have the most autonomy, such as in the choice of Parliamentary Questions or Private Members Bills.

Third, party politics may be changed. Conservative MPs determine the choice of the candidates, who can be elected as party leader by the wider membership, while Labour MPs help select the leader and shadow cabinet. Parliamentarians play a leading role in determining official party policy, as embodied ultimately in the official party manifesto, as well as shaping the nature of the party image in the public's mind. Comparative research by Caul (2001) indicates that the presence of women in senior party positions is a major factor in the adoption of measures to promote sex equality in political representation. Even if women members adopt back bench roles that are similar to men, they could still work effectively behind the scenes, influencing matters such as the contents of party manifestos, the government's legislative agenda, the policy priorities in committees, or the tone and issues raised by parliamentary debate. If these claims are valid, then the entry of more women into parliament could subtly alter the predominant culture and policy agenda at Westminster, a process affecting both women *and* men members equally. Such a shift would not be revealed by comparison of women and men MPs, but rather by changes in the parliamentary culture over time. Yet such a development would be difficult to detect in the UK House of Commons through any systematic means because the dramatic rise in the proportion of women members at Westminster in 1997 coincided with the entry of the new Labour government.

The findings are particularly relevant for the reform of party selection processes, and therefore the opportunities available for women candidates in future elections. In 2001 the *Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act* became law, allowing British parties to use affirmative action to increase their complement of women representatives. As drafted, the legislation is permissive. It removes the possibility of prosecution for affirmative action under British law. It does not indemnify parties from prosecution under European law. But whether parties will take advantage of this legislation depends upon their predominant culture and how far they favour such measures. The presence of women who support such measures in the senior ranks of the party will affect how parties react (Caul, 2001). The parliamentary selection processes used by parties could therefore be influenced by the attitudes of women candidates and MPs who are pressuring for new opportunities for women in elected office.

Lastly, as Mansbridge (1999) suggests the composition of parliament could have a significant impact on the articulation and defence of group interests within representative democracy. Women's presence as elected representatives signals the legitimacy of their concerns and may bring a wider recognition of those interests.

It therefore seems plausible that the value differences documented here among women and men politicians on issues of women's autonomy, combined with the increased feminisation of public office that has occurred in Britain during the last decade, are likely to have broad long-term consequences for representative democracy.

We can conclude that the entry of more women into Westminster will not generate a radical revolution in the predominant culture at Westminster, as the more optimistic scenarios suggest. But nor are there grounds to believe that the entry of more women into Westminster merely led to 'politics as usual'. The evidence consistently suggests that women politicians in all the major British parties (not just Labour) do bring a different set of values to issues affecting women's equality, in the workplace, home, and public sphere. While it may take some time, if these attitudes gradually come to shape party manifestos, political debates and ultimately legislative action, for example by influencing policies towards equal pay, reproductive rights, and the adoption of affirmative action strategies in the recruitment of women within parties, then the entry of more women into Westminster has the capacity to make more than simply a symbolic difference to the face of British representative democracy.

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Notes

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- 1 Diamond, 1977; Thomas, 1994; Norris, 1996; Tremblay, 1998; MacDougal, 1998; Carroll, 2001; Swers, 2001.
- 2 See, for example, Brooks *et al.*, 1990; Perrigo, 1996; Phillips, 1995, 1998; Short, 1996; MacDougal, 1998.

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