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Leveling The Playing Field: Electoral Thresholds and the Representation of Women

Abstract

There are large cross-national differences in the percentage of women in legislatures. Institutional arrangement is a considerable explanatory factor in the disparity in women's representation, and many mechanisms have been implemented to increase parity. Within PR systems, electoral systems are a way to try to increase the representation of women. Previous studies have linked thresholds to increased party magnitude and in turn to increased women's representation, but there have not been extensive studies to directly link thresholds to women's representation. This paper analyzes the impact of thresholds directly, finding that the relationship between thresholds and women's representation is not as strong or as direct as assumed within the previous literature.

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Tracy Quinlan

There are large cross-national differences in the percentage of women in legislatures. Institutional arrangement is a considerable explanatory factor in the disparity in women's representation, and many mechanisms have been implemented to increase parity. Within PR systems, electoral systems are a way to try to increase the representation of women. Previous studies have linked thresholds to increased party magnitude and in turn to increased women's representation, but there have not been extensive studies to directly link thresholds to women's representation. This paper analyzes the impact of thresholds directly, finding that the relationship between thresholds and women's representation is not as strong or as direct as assumed within the previous literature.

General Situation of Women in Parliaments

Women make up more than half of the world's population, but as of August 31, 2003, compose only 15.3% of the elected representatives to national legislatures (IPU). A large discourse has emerged trying to explain this under representation, and a debate has developed about what variables have the greatest explanatory value. The political culture side of the argument claims that without certain socio-economic conditions, educational standards, or feminist movements the representation of women can be severely limited. It is only in more egalitarian societies that women obtain respected elected offices. Institutionalists, on the other hand, stress that institutions do make a difference. Without woman-friendly electoral systems, such as proportional representation, the success of women vying for political office can be greatly hindered. Even if a society is progressive and women have extensive rights, institutions can limit or expand representation. Not all proportional electoral systems are created equal. Various institutional "tweaks" can alter the woman-friendliness of a system. Electoral thresholds provide a strong example of how particular rules can affect the membership of a governing body. There is debate regarding the effect and importance of thresholds, and this paper adds to that discourse by directly examining the impact of thresholds on women.

An electoral threshold is the percentage of votes that must be achieved in order to gain access to the legislature. The relationship between thresholds and women's representation has not been conclusively studied. In theory, high electoral thresholds are seen to decrease the number of parties admitted to the legislature, thereby increasing party magnitude and women's representation. At the same time, low electoral thresholds may be important to women's representation. Low thresholds allow new, small parties access to the legislature. These parties may be leftist and friendly to women, such as Green parties, and increase the number of women brought into the legislature. Despite these conflicting theories, there has not been a study directly examining the linkage between electoral threshold and women's representation. Does such a relationship exist? And if there is a relationship, why should we even care and what does that imply? The answers to these questions are extremely important, especially since electoral thresholds are institutional mechanisms that are relatively easy to change. I hypothesize that the higher the electoral threshold, the greater the representation of women in a legislature. I choose not to argue that low thresholds are more woman-friendly because while they may allow access for small women friendly leftist parties, there is just as big of a chance that these small parties may be of the extreme right wing conservative variety.

The Importance of Women in Legislatures

There sometimes seems to be a temptation to brush off gender equality as something that is nice, but not essential. If the electorate chooses all representatives, then each legislator is endowed with the responsibility of representing each constituent regardless of sex, race, or economic standing. This logic inherently assumes that no differences exist in the policy goals and implementation strategies of men and women. However, this is not the case. Women do have specific policy goals and priorities that generally differ from men. The increase of women in the US House of Representatives, for example, has led to increased funds for research on women's health issues, increased domestic violence and sexual assault services, and legislation seeking to improve gender equity in education (Thomas, 1998). Women also bring a different type of leadership style into politics. Female legislators tend to be more consensual and open to cooperation than men (Carey, Niemi, and Powell, 1998), allowing for legislation that is more representative of the goals of many different people. Women compose half of the electorate, have different strategies for obtaining goals, and place emphasis on particular policy issues. The gender breakdown of a governing body, therefore, is extremely important.

It has also been argued that in order for an institution to be truly democratic, it must represent all citizens without regard to race, gender, or class (Thomas, 1998). In other words, legitimate authority will only exist if the governing body reflects the breakdown of the larger society. It is important, therefore, for democratic institutions to be welcoming to minority groups, including women. Increased representation of women provides an example of egalitarianism for children currently growing up (Thomas, 1998), as well as establishes the beginning of essential social and business networks for women in the future (Rhode, 2003). The importance of women in political and leadership positions is not to be underestimated.

Factors Affecting Representation in Parliaments

Institutions

The overwhelming majority of literature claims that institutions make a strong and significant impact on the gender composition of a governing body. Generally, proportional representation systems are found to be most advantageous to women (Rule 1981, and 1987). In PR systems, district magnitude (the number of seats available within a district) is far greater than in single member district or first past the post systems. Increased district magnitude allows party gatekeepers the opportunity to balance party lists (Darcy, Welch, and Clark, 1994). Driven by the incentive of appealing to a wide array of voters through a diverse party list, party gatekeepers are more likely to nominate women than they would be in single member districts where the winner takes all. When there is more than one seat, women are seen as less risky. The two houses of the Australian legislature are an extreme example of the impact of proportional representation. In Australia, the House is traditionally composed almost exclusively of men, while the Senate has better female representation. The cause for this is almost definitely the electoral law which mandates an absolute majority for House seats, but a closed list PR for the Senate. Closed party lists give more incentive for ticket balancing by the party leadership and a greater chance for women to gain elected office.

There are, however, many different breeds of proportional representation, and other aspects of the chosen electoral systems can affect the demographics of the legislature (Riedwyl and Steiner, 1995). PR is friendliest to women when there is a high district magnitude. High district magnitude allows for more than one representative from a district. In US state legislatures, district magnitude has a considerable positive effect on the representation of women, even if the states have differing political cultures (Matland and Brown,

1992). District magnitude also affects PR systems. If there is only one candidate in a district, then each party can only run one candidate, effectively making it an SMD election, and providing party gatekeepers with a reason to weed out a lot of women (Matland and Montgomery, 2003). Large district magnitudes—even districts only a seat or two larger—positively effect the election of women (Engstrom 1987).

Party magnitude (the number of seats won by a particular party within a given district) also has an effect on the composition of a governing body. High party magnitude gives party gatekeepers the opportunity to reach further down their party lists in seat allocation. Women tend to occupy these positions, because the more attractive top slots on a party list go to the party leadership, who tend to be men. High party magnitude thus increases the chance that women will be allocated a seat. In some case studies, party magnitude has been found to be a better predictor of women's representation than district magnitude (Matland, 1993). Although the effect is not constant, the importance of party magnitude makes logical sense. If a party is awarded more seats, then it can reach further down its party list to the positions women are more likely to occupy.

Electoral thresholds are a variation to PR systems that have the ability to change representation. If a threshold is high, it can reduce the number of parties that gain access to the legislature (Moraski and Loewenberg, 1999) causing party magnitude to increase by reducing party system fragmentation. For example, when thresholds were increased in Latvia from 4% to 5%, only four parties won ten or greater seats in the legislature. In Hungary, the raising of electoral thresholds from 4% to 5% kept twelve small parties out of parliament (Moraski and Loewenberg, 1999), thus increasing party magnitude. A reasonable threshold that increases party magnitude but does not completely eliminate the overall proportionality of a multiple party system seems to be the best structure for women.

Political culture

The main rival explanation for levels of female representation is political culture. Social attitudes and expectations of women can influence women's representation in many ways. If a particular culture is more traditional, then women may be less likely to enter into the political game. Several different methods exist to measure political culture; proxy variables and values surveys are two of the most common. Using the proxy variable of religion, Andrew Reynolds (1999) finds that there is a relationship between religious orientation and the prevalence of women in the legislative and executive branches of government. Another study focuses on five socioeconomic factors to create a proxy analysis. The cultural variable was measured using religion, ratification of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and a dummy variable regarding the legality of abortion. However, Kenworthy and Malami (1999) found no significant relationship between political culture and women's representation. The only socio-economic variable that made a distinct effect on the number of female legislators was the percentage of professional occupations held by women. While Kenworthy and Malami did not find a relationship between a women's movement and better representation of women in a legislature, Saxonberg did (2000). The low number of women in eastern European parliaments is explained in part due to the lack of a women's movement. Unlike Western Europe, the East has not experienced a strong feminist push on political parties for greater women's involvement within legislatures.

The use of proxy variables is helpful, but they fail to truly test the effect of political culture and citizen's attitudes. Norris and Inglehart (2000, 2001) instead employ World Values Surveys to the political culture question. Questions regarding feelings about women in general, as well as women in high-power positions, were employed. With access to better data, Norris and Inglehart were able to conclude that culture does matter,

and the more egalitarian cultures that are typically found in postindustrial nations makes policy reforms easier to implement. For non-postindustrial nations, there is hope. In these societies, younger women have more egalitarian views, which suggests that eventually more equal representation is possible. However, political culture does not have a strong enough explanatory factor to work independently. Reynolds (1999) calls cultural variables such as religion a "foundation" that woman-friendly political institutions can be built on to further advance the representation of women.

While the political culture argument of women's representation is intriguing, it has major limitations. A society may be extremely egalitarian and supportive to women in high office, but if the rules of the game do not allow candidates that are different from the status quo, their success will be constrained. Furthermore, political culture is extremely difficult to change. Its value as an explanatory factor can be analyzed, but what happens next? There is an explanation, but it is hard to use it to apply to change a current situation. Political culture is very stable in comparison to more flexible institutions. Institutions can be changed. They can be tailored to a nation to achieve a particular balance or proportionality in a legislative chamber, and the impact of an institutional change can be felt rather quickly. Due the limitation of political culture, it is best to use it as a control variable when measuring the effect of particular institutions on women's representation.

Research Design

In analyzing the effect of electoral thresholds on women's representation, it is important to select cases that have a range from low to high in both representation and thresholds. Since electoral thresholds are tools employed exclusively in proportional representation elections, majoritarian systems were not included. Mixed systems are included, but the competitive party, district magnitude, and party magnitude data represents only results from the PR proportion of the legislature. The cases were further limited by location. Only European nations, including post-communist Eastern Europe and Russia, are used in this analysis. Selecting European countries limits the cases to a specific region, while at the same time allowing for variance in levels of democracy, specific electoral rules, and women's representation. The electoral results for each nation are the most current data available. In cases where the electoral threshold has changed (Croatia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovenia), election results since 1990 are used. The level of analysis, therefore, is an election under a particular set of threshold rules. In most of the Western European cases, that means a single data point; but in cases like Croatia, the electoral rules have changed in each post-communist election. Thirty-seven cases are evaluated (Table 1).

Dependent variable

The dependent variable is the percentage of women in the legislature (Table 1). Data for the lower chamber is used if the institution is bicameral, and the primary data source is the International Parliamentary Union. If the electoral system is mixed, only data for the proportional representation portion of the legislature was used.

Table 1: Cases and Dependent Variable

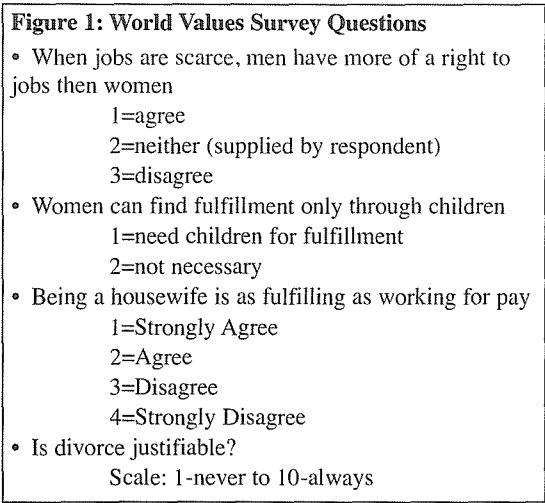
Case	DV: % Women's representation	Case	DV: % Women's representation
Austria	33.9	Lithuania 2: 1996 & 2000	12.86
Bulgaria	26.2	Luxembourg	16.7
Croatia 1: 1992	3	Netherlands	36.7
Croatia 2: 1995	8.75	Norway	36.4
Croatia 3: 2000	20.5	Poland 1: 1991	13
Cyprus	10.7	Poland 2: 1993	12
Czech Republic	17	Poland 3: 1997	13
Denmark	38	Poland 4: 2001	20.2
Estonia	18.8	Portugal	19.1
Finland	37.5	Russia	7.6
Germany	34.5	Slovakia	9.2
Greece	8.7	Slovenia 1:1992	6.8
Hungary 1: 1990	10.47	Slovenia 2: 2000	12.2
Hungary 2: 1994-2002	8	Spain	28.3
Iceland	30.2	Sweden	45.3
Italy	18	Switzerland	23
Latvia	21	Turkey	4.4
Liechtenstein	12	Ukraine	6.66
Lithuania 1: 1992	7.1	<i>Sources: International Parliamentary Union (2003) and Matland & Montgomery (2003)</i>	

Independent variables

The primary independent variable is electoral threshold. Appendix 1 contains data on the size and type of threshold in each of the thirty-seven cases. Due to the differing types of thresholds and different sizes of thresholds in multiple rounds of seat allocation, an index was created to assist in coding electoral thresholds. The scale ranges from one to seven, with one representing zero or very minimal thresholds, and seven representing thresholds of 11% or greater. Since the literature implies that thresholds will increase women's representation by increasing party magnitude, cases with multiple thresholds were coded with the idea of how much the threshold ought to decrease party fragmentation. Appendix 1 also contains the threshold code assigned to each case, as well as the scale.

The literature relating women's representation to thresholds hinges on the level of party magnitude. Party magnitude is the number of seats a political party wins in a particular district. This can be extremely difficult to measure in nations that have multiple rounds of seat allocation. It is also difficult to obtain district level data for thirty-seven different cases. Party magnitude, therefore, is measured simply by dividing the district magnitude by the number of competitive parties. District magnitude is defined as the number of seats in a district, and is measured by the number of PR seats divided by the total number of districts. Parties garnering ten PR seats in the election qualify as a competitive party.

Measuring the third independent variable, political culture, can be done in several different ways. Socio-economic factors, education, and feelings towards government all are



involved in the political culture of a particular state. In this case, the aspect of political culture that is most germane are feelings and attitudes towards women in society (Figure 1). In a similar manner to Norris and Inglehart (2001), an index has been created based on responses from World Value Survey data. The average response of individuals in each nation is used in compiling the scale. The political culture scale ranges from four (most traditionalistic) to eighteen (most progressive). More progressive nations are expected to have higher levels

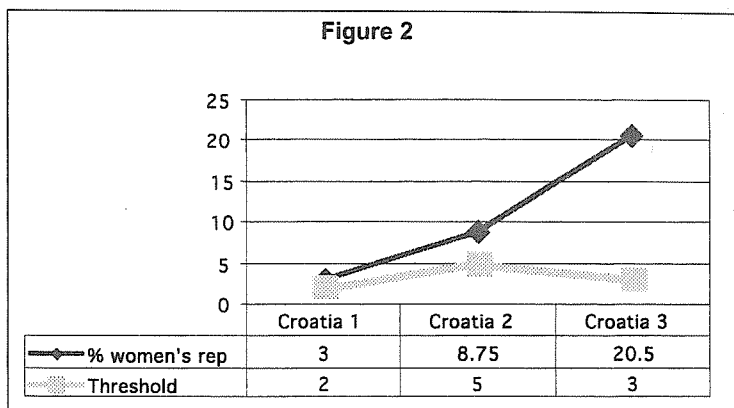
of women’s representation because the citizenry is more comfortable with the idea of women in the workforce and in positions of power. Ideally, a direct measure of the acceptance of women in positions of political leadership would be employed. However, due to limited survey responses on questions directly relating women and political office, questions instead were selected to gage the freedom that women have in several different roles.

Due to the large number of cases, employing a straight comparative cases method is not practical. Instead, bivariate statistics are used to determine if a relationship exists between the independent variables and the dependent variable. If the literature is correct, there should be a positive relationship between electoral thresholds and party magnitude, as well as between party magnitude and women’s representation. By comparing the results of these relationships with the relationship between electoral thresholds and women’s representation, it can be determined if the threshold is having the effect on women’s representation. Political culture is used as a control variable so that the relationship between the institutional arrangements and female representation can be analyzed without interference from culture.

Data Analysis and Results

The preliminary analyses of the raw data do not look particularly promising. The theory is not consistently shown. According to the theory, the larger the threshold, the greater the representation of women. Countries in which the electoral threshold has increased in election cycles, therefore, would expect to have women’s representation figures greater than in the previous election. A quick look at the data for Croatia does not entirely support this theory. As seen in Figure 2, when the threshold increases, women’s representation increases as well. But when the threshold is dropped in the next election cycle, the percentage of women represented in the legislature decreases.

The example of Croatia is not unique. Each theorized institutional relationship is statistically insignificant (Figure 3). Of the institutional relationships, the strongest is between the percentage of women in PR seats and the number of competitive parties. This suggests that women’s representation is greater when fewer parties enter the legislature, which is consistent with theories relating women’s representation, thresholds, and party magnitude. However, the lack of a statistically significant relationship between party magnitude and electoral threshold is interesting. The motivation for implementing thresholds is to weed out small parties in order to prevent them from participating in the allocation of



seats. Not only is this relationship statistically insignificant, at -0.035 , it has low substantive significance that actually shows a relationship opposite to what the theory predicts.

The only variable that is statistically significant is culture. The original intent of the

project was to use culture as a control variable, but culture proved to have a stronger relationship to women's representation than choice of political institution. Political culture is statistically significant at the 0.004 level. 45% of the variance in women's representation is explained by through the culture measure. Since the institutional variables did not correlate in the proper direction or at a significant level by themselves, further analysis to weed out any interference caused by political culture in these hypothesized relationships was not necessary.

Conclusions

The direct relationship between thresholds and women's representation was not found in this study. The causal mechanism of thresholds decreasing the number of competitive parties, increasing party

Figure 3

	Pearson Correlation	Significance (1-tailed test)
Women's representation and Thresholds	-0.29	0.054
Women's representation and Party Magnitude	-0.24	0.077
Women's representation and Competitive Parties	0.174	0.152
Women's representation and		
Culture	0.454	0.004*
Threshold and Party Magnitude	-0.035	0.418
n=37		
*significant at the 0.01 level		

magnitude, and increasing women's representation appears to have been relied on and assumed in the literature incorrectly. This project, however, is just a beginning to a greater exploration of the effect that specific institutional rules have on women's representation. There are several possible reasons why the data did not support the theory, including coding of electoral thresholds and party magnitude. Both measures used are simplistic and do not incorporate all of the nuances of slight differences between countries adequately. The thresholds were coded on a scale from 1 to 7. While this allowed for variance, it also caused somewhat of a bottleneck at levels 2 and 3. The party magnitude measure needs a more detailed way of determining the number of districts from which to base party magnitude. In this study, each district was counted as one unit—whether it be a regional level district or a national district. Multiple rounds of elections were compiled into one simplis-

tic number. For example, a system with two rounds in which there are twenty original districts, and then scrap vote allocation to a national district list would have received an average district magnitude of twenty-one. More sophisticated operationalization of variables may produce results that come closer to defending the theory and have greater accuracy.

The importance of the political culture variable is a reminder that culture cannot be ignored. Culture is responsible for explaining a large portion of variance in levels of representation. Institutions, therefore, may have some effect, but if there is not a political culture that is supportive to women seeking equal rights and employment outside the home, it is highly doubtful that institutional arrangement will make a difference. It is also possible that on a largely general level political culture may help to explain the degree of party fragmentation in a state. If political culture is largely consensual and there are not deep cleavages, the number of political parties and the degree of ideological difference between them may be minimized. A culture leading to fewer political parties in a party list proportional representation system may be another chain that explains women's representation levels.

If culture really is the strongest explanatory factor of women's representation, there needs to be more research on what particular aspects of political culture lead to the greatest parity in the composition of legislatures. More sophisticated measures of political culture need to be developed. Surveys need to be expanded to be more uniform across a universe of cases; to be effective, questions need to be more consistent. Surveys need to get to the motivation behind responses. It is helpful to know how many respondents in a country think that women make as good of a political leader as a man, but if parity is the eventual goal, researchers need to understand how these values are developed and if there is any room for change. By decreasing the reliance of researchers on theorized institutional mechanisms that do not consistently show relationships and increasing and expanding the analysis of political culture, the discourse of women's representation can continue to progress.

Appendix 1: Thresholds and Coding					
Case	General Threshold	Single Party Threshold	Coalition Threshold	Other threshold	Code
Austria	0	0	0		1
Bulgaria	4%				3
Croatia 1: 1992	3%				2
Croatia 2: 1995		5%	8% (blocs of 2)	11% (blocs 3+)	5
Croatia 3: 2000	5%				3
Cyprus	10% or 1 quota seat +8%	2)	20% (blocs of	25% (blocs of 3+)	7
Czech Republic		5%	7% (blocs of 2)	9% (bloc of 3), 11% (bloc of 4)	5
Denmark	0				5
Estonia	5%				3
Finland	0				1
Germany	5%				3
Greece	3%				2
Hungary 1: 1990	4%				3
Hungary 2: 1994-2002	5%				3
Iceland	0%				1
Italy	0%				1
Latvia	5%				3
Liechtenstein	8%				5
Lithuania 1: 1992	4%				3
Lithuania 2: 1996 & 2000		5%	7%		4
Luxembourg	0%				1
Netherlands	0.67%				1
Norway	0				1
Poland 1: 1991				5% for national list	3
Poland 2: 1993		5%	8%	7% for national list	4
Poland 3: 1997		5%	8%	7% for national list	4
Poland 4: 2001		5%	8%	7% for national list	4
Portugal	0				1
Russia	5%				3
Slovakia	5%				3
Slovenia 1:1992	3%				2
Slovenia 2: 2000	4%				3
Spain	3%				2
Sweden	4% nationally or 12% in district				7
Switzerland	0%				1
Turkey	10%				6
Ukraine	4%				3
Coding Key: No Threshold-1%=1; 2-3%=2; 4-5%=3; 6-7%=4; 8-9%=5; 10-11%=6; >11%=7					
Data Sources: International Parliamentary Union Parline Database (2003), Matland & Montgomery (2003), and the Lijphart Electoral Archives (2003).					

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