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Let Us In, Let Us In: A Study of Legislative Representation In Post-Communist Europe

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Abstract

There is no dispute that women are grossly under-represented in the world's legislatures. However, there are several explanations for this under-representation and for the variation that exists between regions and between countries. The prevailing literature points to institutional, developmental, and cultural variables. This study uses the postcommunist context in order to control for culture. Given the common experience of state socialism and the re-traditionalization of social values associated with a backlash against directive emancipation, culture cannot be the main factor in determining the wide variation in levels of female legislative representation in the new democracies of Eastern Europe. In testing for both institutional variations and levels of modernity, this study suggests that socioeconomic development explains variation across the region while institutions explain variations within countries over time. Furthermore, low socioeconomic development may place a ceiling on the extent to which "woman-friendly" institutions can increase female representation.

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There is no dispute that women are grossly under-represented in the world's legislatures. However, there are several explanations for this under-representation and for the variation that exists between regions and between countries. The prevailing literature points to institutional, developmental, and cultural variables. This study uses the post-communist context in order to control for culture. Given the common experience of state socialism and the re-traditionalization of social values associated with a backlash against directive emancipation, culture cannot be the main factor in determining the wide variation in levels of female legislative representation in the new democracies of Eastern Europe. In testing for both institutional variations and levels of modernity, this study suggests that socioeconomic development explains variation across the region while institutions explain variations within countries over time. Furthermore, low socioeconomic development may place a ceiling on the extent to which "woman-friendly" institutions can increase female representation.

Introduction

Women are under-represented in legislatures throughout the world. Only 13.9 percent of all legislators are women (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2000). The presence of female faces does not, by itself, guarantee political equality. In the post-communist legislatures, the decrease in the number of female members since communism does not necessarily entail a decrease in women's political influence, because descriptive representation was achieved through the use of quotas in single candidate races (Wolchik, 1998). Arguably, however, female parliamentarians are necessary to get women's issues on the agenda, and the absence of women in the decision making process has negative repercussions for the quality of democracy (Rueschemeyer, 1994; Matland and Taylor, 1997; Zimmerman, 1994). Women in post-communist countries stand to lose substantial rights during the dual economic and democratic transitions (Einhorn, 1993).

While no country in the world has achieved gender equity, Sweden is close with 42.7 percent of the seats in the legislature held by women (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2000). On the other end of the spectrum, advanced industrial nations, such as the United States, Ireland, France, and Japan range from 7 to 13 percent (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2000). As Table 1 shows, the post-communist cases generally fall into this lower category, declining from a communist era average of about 20 to 30 percent to levels as low as 3 to 5 percent in founding elections in Ukraine, Macedonia, and Albania. Several countries have seen the level of female representation improve over the decade since democratization began. Croatia in 2000 posted 20 percent female representation. The regional average, however, remains below the levels found in much of Western Europe. This raises a twofold question: Why is there so much variation among post-communist countries; and what explains change over time within post-communist cases?

Table 1. Female Representation in Post-Communist Legislatures

Case (country & election year)	% women	Case (country & election year)	% women
Albania 91	3.6	Macedonia 90	4.2
92	5.7	94	3.3
93	5.16	98	6.67
Bulgaria 90	8.5	Moldova 94	4.8
91	12.9	98	8.91
94	13.3		
97	10.8		
Croatia 92	5.8	Poland 89	13.5
95	7.78	91	9.6
00	20.5	93	13
		97	13
Czech Rep. 96	15	Romania 90	3.6
98	5	92	4.1
		96	7.3
		00	10.7
Hungary 90	7.3	Slovakia 94	14.7
94	11.4	98	14
98	8.29		
Latvia 93	15	Slovenia 92	14.4
98	17	96	12.2
		00	12.2
Lithuania 92	4.2	Ukraine 94	3.8
96	3.3	98	7.8
00	6.67		

Three Barriers to Female Representation

According to the extant literature, the variation in female legislative representation can be explained by cultural, socioeconomic, and institutional variables (Kostova, 1998 and 1994; Matland, 1998; Norris and Inglehart, 2000; Reynolds, 1999; Kenworthy and Malawi, 1999).

Political culture affects female representation in three ways: it affects whether or not women are willing to enter the political arena; it affects the degree to which women are willing to place pressure on party gatekeepers to recruit women, and finally, it determines whether or not the electorate will support female candidates (Norris and Inglehart, 2000; Jaquette, 1997; Etzioni-Halevi and Illy, 1993). Norris and Inglehart find that culture, measured through responses to attitudinal survey questions, has a significant and independent affect on the recruitment of women. Others have operationalized culture using socio-demographic proxies, such as female illiteracy rates, the ratio of the female work force compared to the male work force, and level of female education. These factors are expected to indicate the degree to which the prevailing political culture is egalitarian or traditional.

Matland (1998) sees a more direct role for socioeconomic development or modernity. He argues that, without some basic level of socioeconomic development,

women simply lack the cognitive and material resources necessary to mobilize. They must focus instead on issues of family survival. This contention is not without critics, however. Empirical research notes that high levels of socioeconomic development are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for high rates of female representation and institutional scholars emphasize that the "rules of the game" are gendered in crucial ways (Norris and Inglehart, 2000; Jaquette, 1997).

The institutional argument usually focuses on the electoral system. In established democracies, electoral systems have been estimated to explain almost 30 percent of the variation in female representation (Norris and Inglehart, 2000). The literature generally supports the idea that proportional representation (PR) provides better opportunities for female candidates than single-member district plurality (Norris and Inglehart, 2000; Kostova, 1998; Chowdhury and Nelson, 1994; Etzioni-Halevi and Illy, 1993; Jaquette, 1997; Zimmerman, 1994). PR benefits women because it encourages ticket balancing (Matland, 1998; Matland and Taylor, 1997). Parties can reach out to particular constituencies in a PR system without displacing powerful intra-party interests or taking the risk of "losing votes." In a single member district (SMD) system, the "zero sum" nature of competition leads parties to choose safe, entrenched party interests who usually happen to be male. How much a PR system benefits female legislative representation depends on the district magnitude, the number of seats filled by a given constituency, and the party magnitude, the size of the delegation a party can expect to send to the legislature (Matland, 1998; Matland and Taylor, 1997). This, in turn, depends on the relevant number of parties in the system (Matland and Taylor, 1997). The greater the party magnitude, the more likely a party is to balance its ticket. Hence, electoral systems that reduce the number of parties through the use of thresholds ought to favor female candidates.

There is growing acknowledgement that variables from the three approaches probably work together in complex ways. Socioeconomic development affects cultural norms; and institutions, while important, do not exist in a vacuum. Political and social pressures are necessary for institutions to produce high levels of female legislative representation (Chowdhury and Nelson, 1994; Kenworthy and Malawi, 1999; Reynolds, 1999).

The post-communist context is so interesting because it is widely agreed that post-communist women have rejected Western feminism (Wolchik, 1998; Matynia, 1994; Goldfarb, 1997; Funk, 1993; Meznari and Ule, 1994). This common cultural "allergy" to feminism is depicted as a reaction to policies of "directive emancipation" that were all too often reduced to the duty and necessity of paid labor-force participation, a situation that created an extreme form of the double burden and excluded women from positions of real socioeconomic and political power (Einhorn, 1993; Jaquette and Wolchik, 1998; Funk, 1993; Fodor, 1994; Reuschemeyer, 1994; Regulska, 1994; Siemieniska, 1998; Meznaric and Ule, 1994; Szalai 1998). The reaction against directive emancipation has been accompanied and reinforced by the emergence of nationalism. In rejecting communism and its basic principles, such as secularism and gender equality, the traditional role of women as homemakers has resurged (Regulska, 1994; Funk, 1993; Siemieniska, 1998 and 1999; Kostova, 1998; Einhorn, 1993). Women are seen as the protectors of the nation against "dirty" politics and familial degradation (Einhorn, 1993; Siemieniska, 1998). East European publics are markedly more traditional about gender roles than their West

European counterparts and far less likely to participate in politics or vote (Norris and Inglehart, 2000).

To the extent that this re-traditionalization of values has been common across the region, cultural explanations cannot account for the variations across post-communist cases or within individual countries overtime. All of the communist countries achieved high levels of female literacy and workforce participation, variables that might also be used as proxies for cultural egalitarianism. The post-communist context therefore provides an opportunity to examine directly the impact of socioeconomic development and electoral institutions.

Research Design and Methodology

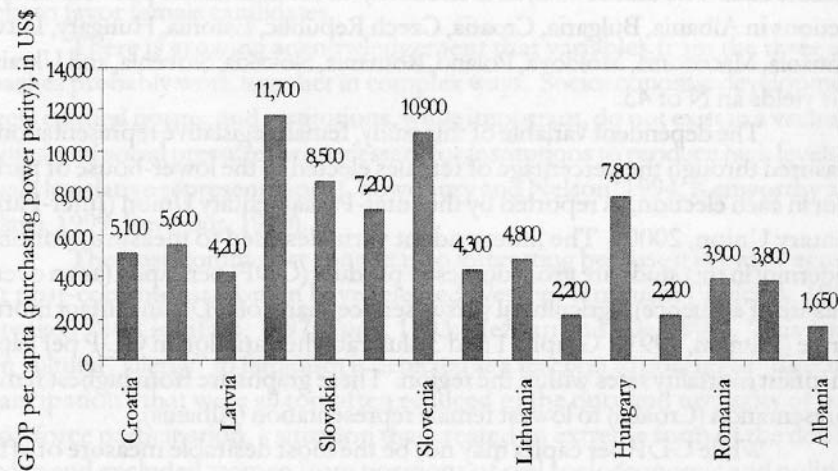
The main hypotheses of this study are (1) the more "woman-friendly" the electoral system, the higher the level of female representation, and (2) the higher the level of socioeconomic development, the higher the level of female legislative representation. These hypotheses are tested in the post-communist countries of Eastern Europe. Much of the former Soviet Union, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina are excluded from the analysis due to lack of available data. The unit of analysis is election-year for all available post-communist elections in Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Ukraine. This yields an N of 43.

The dependent variable of this study, female legislative representation, is measured through the percentage of females elected to the lower-house of parliament in each election, as reported by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2000). The independent variables used to measure economic modernity in this study are gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (as an overall measure of affluence), agricultural versus service shares of GDP, and infant mortality rate (Putnam, 1993). Graphs 1 and 3 illustrate the variation in GDP per capita and infant mortality rates within the region. These graphs are from highest female representation (Croatia) to lowest female representation (Albania).

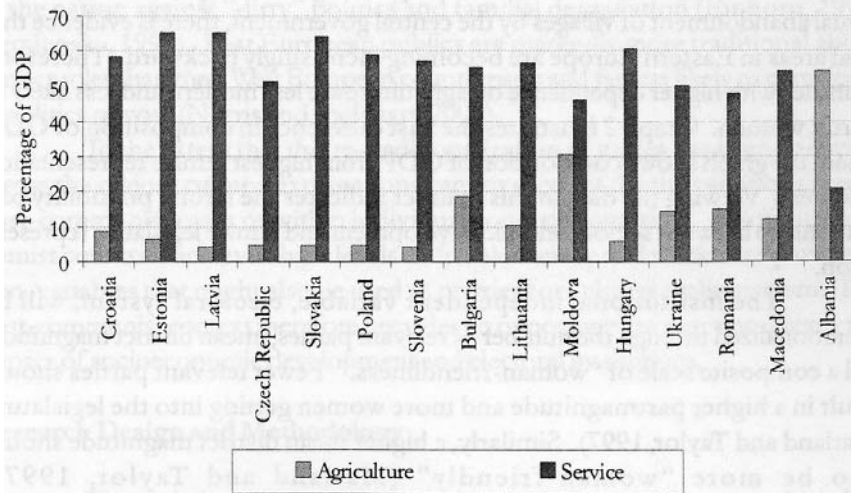
While GDP per capita may not be the most desirable measure of affluence — due to the volatility of the post-communist economies — it was the best measure available for all cases. The composition of GDP may be even more telling. Heavy and rapid industrialization was a core element of all communist centrally-planned economies. As a result, all of the countries in this study are industrialized; however, heavy "metal eating" industry is not profitable in the modern economy. The post-communist countries which have been able to overcome the rapid communist industrialization and move on to service industries are considered the more economically modern. With the collapse of agricultural productivity and the virtual abandonment of villages by the central government, there is evidence that rural areas in Eastern Europe are becoming increasingly backward. Therefore, countries with higher dependence on agriculture are less modern and less likely to recruit women. Graph 2 illustrates the vast difference in composition of GDP. Again, the graph shows composition of GDP from highest female representation to lowest. Viewing the data in this manner indicates the strong possibility of a relationship between socioeconomic development and female legislative representation.

The institutional independent variable, electoral system, will be operationalized through the number of relevant parties,¹ mean district magnitude, and a composite scale of "woman-friendliness." Fewer relevant parties should result in a higher partmagnitude and more women getting into the legislature (Matland and Taylor, 1997). Similarly, a higher mean district magnitude should also be more "woman-friendly" (Matland and Taylor, 1997).

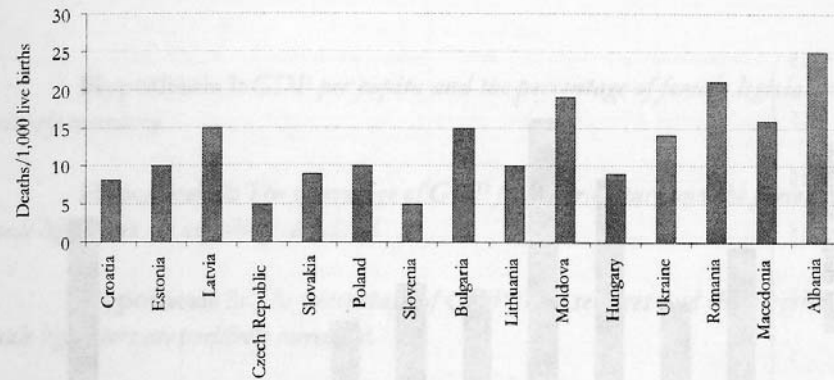
Graph 1. Measure of Overall Affluence



Graph 2. Composition of GDP

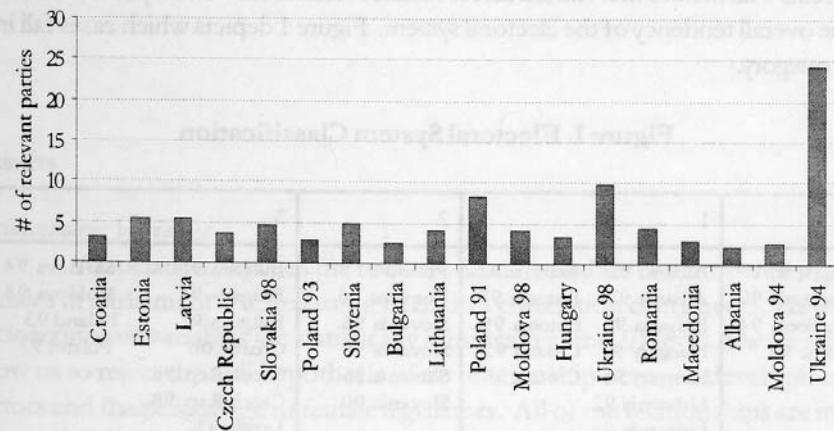


Graph 3. Infant Mortality Rates

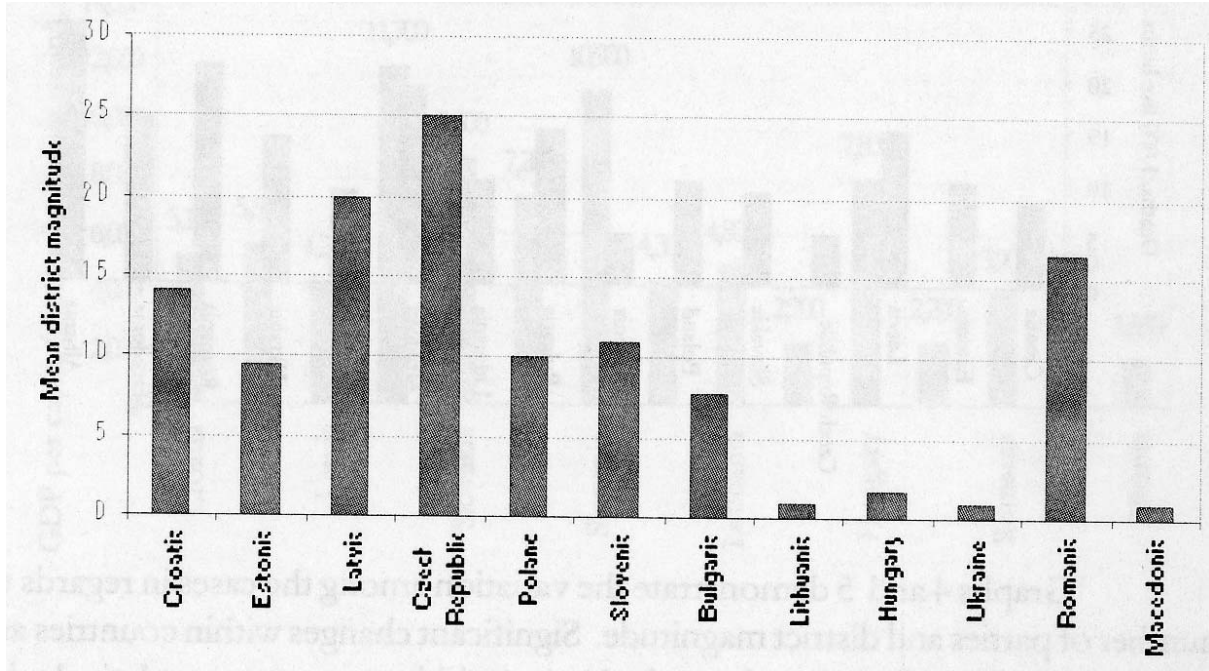


Graphs 4 and 5 demonstrate the variation among the cases in regards to number of parties and district magnitude. Significant changes within countries are noted. Otherwise, the values for each election within a country are relatively the same.

Graph 4. Percent of Relevant Parties



Graph 5. District Magnitude



Several features of electoral system are captured in a rough scale of 0 (SMD) to 3 (PR with threshold).² The most woman-friendly is a PR system that reduces party fragmentation through use of a threshold. This measure does not take into account the size of threshold, size of legislature, or method of translating votes into seats — all factors that should affect female recruitment - but it provides a sense of the overall tendency of the electoral system. Figure 1 depicts which cases fall into each category.

Figure 1. Electoral System Classification

0	1	2	3
Albania 91	Albania 92 Estonia 92	Poland 91	Bulgaria 91 Moldova 94
Macedonia 90	Albania 97 Estonia 95	Romania 90	Bulgaria 94 Moldova 98
Macedonia 94	Bulgaria 90 Estonia 99	Slovakia 96	Bulgaria 97 Poland 93
Ukraine 94	Hungary 90 Croatia 92	Slovakia 98	Croatia 00 Poland 97
	Hungary 98 Croatia 95	Slovenia 96	Czech Rep 96
	Lithuania 92	Slovenia 00	Czech Rep 98
	Lithuania 96		Latvia 93

	Lithuania 00		Romania 92
	Slovenia 92		Romania 96
	Macedonia 98		Romania 00
	Ukraine 9H		Slovakia 94

Putting It All Together

Using the measures discussed above, this study tests the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: *GDP per capita and the percentage of female legislators are positively correlated.*

Hypothesis 2: *The percentage of GDP from agriculture and the percentage of female legislators are negatively correlated.*

Hypothesis 3: *The percentage of GDP from services and the percentage of female legislators are positively correlated.*

Hypothesis 4: *Infant mortality rate as an indicator of development is negatively correlated with female representation.*

Hypothesis 5: *The number of relevant parties and the percentage of female legislators are negatively correlated.*

Hypothesis 6: *High district magnitude and the percentage of female legislators are positively correlated.*

Hypothesis 7: *The more "woman-friendly" the electoral system, the higher the level of female representation.*

Results

Socioeconomic Variables

Association between the socioeconomic variables and the percentage of females in parliament is tested using Pearson's correlation coefficients. All of the socioeconomic variables are statistically significant at the .01 level. Data analyses allow us to reject the null hypothesis of no relationship between developmental factors and the percentage of female legislators. All of the relationships are in the expected direction, but the degree of post-industrialization (percent of GDP from services) displays the most robust relationship.

Table 2. Correlation of Socioeconomic Variables with Dependent Variable

Hypothesis	Independent Var.	Correlation Coefficient	Significance Level
H ₁	GDP per Capita	.508**	.000
H ₂	% of GDP from agriculture	-.567**	.002
H ₃	% of GDP from service	.638*-	.000
H ₄	Infant mortality rate	-.488**	.000

Institutional Variables

Mean district magnitude¹ and electoral system are in the expected direction, statistically significant at the .01 level, and strongly correlated with the dependent variable. In systems with many relevant parties, fewer women make it into parliament. As with the other institutional variables, the relationship is in the expected direction, but it is neither strong nor statistically significant. This is not surprising given that the number of relevant parties changes dramatically in only a few cases. In countries that have seen a drastic reduction in the number of parties, e.g. Ukraine in 1998 and Poland in 1993, there has been a significant increase in female representation. As with the socioeconomic variables, the null hypothesis can be rejected.

Table 3. Correlation of Institutional Variables with Dependent Variable

Hypothesis	Independent Variable	Correlation Coefficient	Level of Significance
H ₅	# of relevant parties	-.084	.300
H ₆	Mean district magnitude	.503**	.005
H ₇	Electoral System	.457*-	.001

Linear regression is used to measure socioeconomic variables and institutional variables against each other. Percentage of GDP from service and mean district magnitude are used in the model since they produce the most robust bivariate correlations. The adjusted R square is .407 and the significance for the model is .006. The

standardized Beta coefficients are .509 for GDP from service and .502 for mean district magnitude. These two variables have roughly the same weight in this model.

What Does This Mean?

The results of this study certainly suggest that, when culture is controlled for, socioeconomic development and institutions affect female legislative representation. In countries with the lowest levels of socioeconomic development - Ukraine, Macedonia, and Albania - female representation is also lowest. In each of these countries, however, a change in institutions, namely the shift from SMD elections to hybrid rules including some element of PR, resulted in a rough doubling of female representation. The regression model supports this. When socioeconomic development (measured through GDP from service) is held constant, mean district magnitude (as a proxy for institutions) helps women.

Table 4. Drastic Changes in Female Representation Due to Changes in Electoral Rules

Country	% women before electoral change	% women after electoral change	improvement
Albania	3.6	5.7	2.1
Macedonia	3.3	6.67	3.4
Ukraine	3.8	7.78	4.0

Matland and Taylor (1997) argue that some minimum threshold of socioeconomic development must be achieved before institutions begin to matter. That contention is weakened by the significance of the institutional variables in this study. Socioeconomic development is the best predictor of the variation in overall levels of female representation across the region; but institutions help to explain variations across time in individual cases. Lower levels of socioeconomic development seem to place a ceiling on female representation. Institutions do matter, but they can only do so much. Albania, Macedonia, and Ukraine remain among the least representative of the countries in this study, despite electoral rules changes that doubled levels of female recruitment, because women in those countries lack the social and economic capital necessary to come forward as aspirants and place pressure on party on party gatekeepers to recruit and promote women. They must focus on matters of family survival. It would seem, therefore, that any recipe to improve women's representation must include both favorable institutions and concrete measures to ensure family survival.

¹ Correlation between mean district magnitude and the dependent variable was measured using Spearman's rho. All other institutional variables were measured with Pearson's correlation coefficients.

² An SMD system was coded as "0," a mixed system as "1," a PR system without a threshold as "2," and a PR system with a threshold as "3."

³ Correlation between mean district magnitude and the dependent variable was measured using Spearman's rho. All other institutional variables were measured with Pearson's correlation coefficients.

Rebecca Ray graduated from Illinois Wesleyan University in 2001 with a Political Science major and a History minor. She is a member of Phi Beta Kappa, Phi Kappa Phi, Pi Sigma Alpha, and Alpha Lambda Delta. In the Fall of 2001, Ray will attend law school at the University of Illinois.

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