3. Feminist Reflections on Representative Democracy

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Introduction

MOST DEMOCRATIC governments claim to support equality for women. None have so far achieved it. Probably equality is not deliverable, but its promise is part of both the attraction and standard defence of democracy. Failures result from fundamental biases of design. Such design failure was probably unavoidable if only because the establishment of representative democratic political institutions pre-dated women's political mobilisation. In common with other political systems, they were engineered for and by successive dominant groups of men aiming to build institutions to protect their power and privilege. The resulting arrangements are based on a relationship between public and private life that trapped women in the private sphere, where they are designated as others, as different, always as less than men. In these systems, women were first treated as chattel, as dependents, as minors, and more recently as a minority, despite constituting more than half the population. In short, efforts by women to get political equality fail because the operating institutions of representative democracy are inappropriate to accommodate ascribed and real differences between women and men.

Defining democracy

Normally when we think about democracy we think both about the ideas and the institutions, often without particularly acknowledging that they are different. The ideas raise expectations of inclusion and equality. Historically, the set of ideas around democracy became more complicated as struggles to establish, protect and be included in it have developed. So too did the political systems which accumulated an array of institutions of decision making and accountability. Ideas about what democracy is, and how it is defined may be placed on a continuum from a fairly minimal arrangement for choosing leaders to complex systems involving freedom, rights, accountability, equality, representation and security. The ideas are expressed in institutions such as legislatures, elections, political parties, constitutions and laws, judiciaries, executives, the separation of powers and freedom of the press and of expression. Contemporary democracies are political systems, sets of institutions that claim to guarantee and protect the

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agreed ideas. This is an ideal type. In practice, embedded in the structures that we know as democracies are the privileges of elites who are protected from their responsibilities.

How we define democracy is itself an issue. Sometimes reduced by analysis to no more than a system of decision making, in practice the way it is understood determines who is included and excluded and how it is controlled. Democracy is self-government of the people, historically practised in the ancient world via assemblies in relatively small city states. The people were men and the method, apparently, was direct. It was inefficient and by today's standards, not that democratic. Although citizens ruled through a process of frequent and lengthy meetings, the citizen body was very limited and its freedom to participate dependent on the work of women and slaves who were not citizens.

This essay hence concentrates on representative democracy, which I define simply as a governing system in which politics are organised around an elected assembly. The standard account of the evolution of contemporary representative democracy is that assemblies developed rapidly from the late eighteenth century to become central constitutional institutions. They became legislatures in which representatives were elected from larger territorial units to govern in the name of the people. Most representative democracies have become steadily more complex and at the level of voting and legal citizenship, more inclusive. During the twentieth century universal suffrage was completed by the enfranchisement of women and the working class in a number of states. Thereafter, women were in theory eligible to become representatives, but always on the basis of institutions founded before they were citizens or, in the case of the UK, were legal persons.

While women are eligible to vote and hold elected office, they are not thought to be central to democratic arrangements. Drude Dahlerup notes that only one of the sixty questions used by the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index deals with women (the number of women in parliament), while other indices ignore women's position or subsume it within the treatment of minorities.[1] Indices such as Freedom House and Human Rights Watch are similarly restricted and gender blind. These are not oversights; rather they reflect long-established priorities and arrangements. Only recently was feminine inclusion and presence acknowledged to be an issue. And that inclusion and presence has tended to be very narrowly defined, largely restricted to participation in elections as voters, candidates and elected representatives. As in the political institutions that the indices track, women are afterthoughts, not considered to be fundamental elements of systems of representative democracy.

Any reading of the history of democratic thought reveals not only that its key proponents were men, but also that its vision was a masculine one. With few exceptions, the role of women was not addressed. And even where it was, as in the case of John Stuart Mill's 1869 essay, *The Subjection of Women*, such interventions were not later considered to be part of the canon. Drude

Dahlerup reminds us that even the standard textbooks by modern historians of democratic theory such as George H. Sabine's seemingly endless *A History of Political Theory*, a set text for generations of politics students, did not mention women or women's position once in its 948 pages, and overlooked Mill's study of women's subjugation.[2]

The entire institutional structure and culture now requires wholescale re-engineering if women are to be politically equal. While the initial exclusion of women may be understood in terms of the social conditions in which representative democracy emerged, the assumption of their absence had been built into its institutions.

Exclusion was not only a matter of specific electoral law, but also an assumption of the formal and informal rules of political institutions. The struggle for women's votes was motivated by a reasoning that saw voting as a mechanism of inclusion. From the early nineteenth century, feminists organised to claim rights, including legal personhood, education, employment, property rights and pretty much all the rights that some men then had. Advocates believed that with the vote would come the possibility to establish equal rights and opportunities for women and men. Yet the struggle was long and difficult, resisted at every turn by the beneficiaries of exclusion, the dominant group of men for whom the system worked and who would continue their resistance from within political institutions. The institutions that women were aiming to join were flawed, not only imperfect as democracy, but also so embedded with the dominant masculinities of the times that the very logic of appropriate behaviour privileged men and masculinity and excluded women and femininity.

The biases of democratic citizenship

Ironically, given the association of democracy with the promise of equality, its practical political arrangements are rooted in inequality. Carol Pateman explains how the social contract on which Anglo-American democracies are thought to be based is underpinned by a sexual contract that established men's political control over women.[3] Originally, it established the 'orderly access' of men to women's bodies, denied property rights to women and, most damagingly, denied them personhood under the doctrine of coverture which was part of British Common Law until the late nineteenth century. The sexual contract underpins patriarchy; it is unequal and imposed. Does this mean that democracy is necessarily patriarchal? For many feminists it does; it is an historical fact.

Ruth Lister extends Pateman's arguments to a consideration of citizenship, another foundation stone of democracy.[4] Observing that women stood outside the civil society to which they were linked by subordination and dependence, Lister draws attention to the way that the concept of the citizen in political theory and constitutional law is an abstraction, actually male but formally disembodied. This way of thinking was supported by the

separation of private and public life, in which women in the private sphere were the invisible precondition of public life through the provision of care, reproduction and other unpaid work. The abstraction was possible because only male bodies were present in public life, a life which women could not enter. Women's eventual entry into public life necessarily exposed the role they played in private life and revealed that the body of the abstract citizen was male. The longstanding public invisibility of embodiment and of the private sphere is fundamental to the nature of political institutions in the old democracies. These are organised around men's lives and interests. Women cannot participate on the same terms as men because of their separate roles, their different bodies, and the assumptions that accompany them are not built into the institutions. Lister and Pateman are contributors to a more general feminist debate on the nature of citizenship and democracy. Over several decades, feminist scholars unpacked the gendered dimensions of citizenship, highlighting the different terms on which women and men were treated in state policy—for example on social benefits, pay, employment, and education—showing political equality to be a chimera, dependent on unacknowledged requirements of non-existent economic, social and individual equality. They visualised a model of citizenship that allows for diversity and accommodates women's bodies, allowing for pregnancy, parturition and menstruation.

In common with many of the radical movements of the 1960s, feminists wanted a reorganisation of political life more compatible with principles of equality. In what Kathleen B. Jones described as 'transforming citizenship into friendship', idealised notions of family and friendship informed ideas about political participation. Narrowly constructed and impersonal notions of citizenship based on functional ties and built under conditions of capitalist competition were rejected, to be replaced by affective relationships based on trust. The pursuit of instrumental goals would be replaced by the creative development of personality and sense of community. Idealistic though such conceptions may have been, they contain an understanding that citizenship in a woman-friendly democracy should be rooted in the experiences of women and men. To practice citizenship, women must transform themselves into certain kinds of men rather than participate as women.[5] However, regendering political institutions has eluded reformers. Moreover, even in theory, the solutions of more participatory democratic systems, of direct democracy that many feminists proposed, feature many of the same kinds of problems found in contemporary political institutions. As in the Greek city states, the participation would depend on arrangements that make time and resources to do politics available to citizens.

So, while many feminist theorists offer ideas of democracy that are transformative and egalitarian, most agree that the actual political systems of representative democracy not only permit, but directly secure male power and dominance. This is borne out by empirical evidence which shows that women are numerically under-represented in elected assemblies, that politics

is practised according to male coded norms and rules, that vertical and horizontal sex segregation are consistent features of political hierarchies and institutions, that the public perception of politicians is highly gendered and that policies are biased in favour of men.[6]

Such contentions are a devastating critique of democratic political systems because they deny the possibility of equality and do not permit regendering without a seemingly impossible change in the relationships between public and private life. Equality between women and men (and indeed among women and among men) is a logical impossibility for institutions based on inequality and subjection. This raises a central question: can democracy actually enhance equality for women? Simplifying brutally, we can start to answer this question by tracking progress of women's claims for equality in democratic politics. At a minimum, we should find that over time women come to be treated equally as individuals, colleagues and citizens in public life. I use three examples to illustrate progress, or the lack of it: the experiences of sexual abuse that reflect the treatment of women as individuals; the presence of women in democratic legislatures; and the obstacles to policy change on issues of particular importance to women.

The treatment of women as individuals

Feminist assessments of women's position in democracies illuminate a set of power relationships based on differences between women and men. In general discourse, political actors are not discussed as embodied beings, while masculinity is assumed in discussions of politics which normally treat the citizen or candidate or representative as male, without addressing the implications of so doing. That indifference may be lifting. Recent developments in the UK suggest changes, albeit reluctant and ambivalent, in attitudes to sexual politics. As I began to draft this chapter, the *Financial Times* broke the story of the sexual abuse that was part of the Annual President's Club dinner at the Dorchester Hotel in London's Mayfair. This 'all male' event was organised to raise funds for charity. There were in fact women present as casual employees, who had been instructed to dress in a sexually enticing manner, to jettison their mobile phones and to sign secrecy contracts in order to work the event. These were measures designed to protect the privacy of the many prominent men in attendance. A considerable amount of sexual harassment and abuse took place at the Dorchester, ranging from propositioning the unprotected women to inappropriate touching, flashing, suggestive comments and so forth. There can be little doubt that those in attendance knew what kind of event to expect. The story was taken up throughout the press, broadcasting and social media. It generated numerous comments, expressing surprise that the *Financial Times* regarded it as a story at all. It was a story because the *Financial Times'* editors thought so, their reasoning influenced by the

exposure of abuse in the film industry and especially the many accusations against the powerful Hollywood film producer Harvey Weinstein that preceded it. These in turn followed the publication of the Donald Trump 'access Hollywood' tapes and widespread protests by women after his inauguration as US president at the beginning of 2017. The opening months of 2018 featured almost daily press accounts of the sexual abuse of women and, unusually, some political heads rolled as a result of specific accusations. The allegations were not confined to private arrangements. They also targeted the core institutions of politics, including the House of Commons and political parties.

In the world of politics, sexism and sexual misconduct in the House of Commons are long-standing examples of male privilege. That privilege has frequently been protected by the leadership of political parties. For example, all three major parties blocked the attempt in 2012 to give the Parliamentary Committee for Standards the scope to deal with issues of sexual misconduct.[7] Frequently brought to public attention, as various allegations are reported, only recently have there been active efforts to change this culture and it remains to be seen whether the measures will actually amount to anything. MPs and parliamentary staff are under severe pressure to remain silent about such abuse. The consequences of confronting it were all too apparent, as the investigations into Lord Rennard, the Liberal Democrat Peer and chief executive of the party from 2003 to 2009, accused of sexual abuse of less powerful women in his party, showed. The investigation findings were fudged: an internal Liberal Democrat party enquiry found credible evidence for some of the allegations, yet it was deemed insufficient for criminal charges. The accusers were discredited, their careers ruined. Meanwhile, Rennard himself was briefly suspended from his party, only to be elected in 2015 as Lords' representative to its ruling Federal Executive Committee, a post from which he withdrew following protests in the party and an intervention by party leader Tim Farron. He remains in the party, where he is still influential, while many of the women who he mistreated have resigned.[8] Thus, both Rennard and his victims were punished or penalised, admittedly an improvement on the days when only the victims were punished. More recently, Defence Minister Michael Fallon, International Trade Secretary Mark Garnier, and First Cabinet Secretary Damian Green, were forced to resign as a result of sexual misconduct allegations. They too are still in their parties and in the House of Commons.

If we are now at a tipping point, it has been a long time coming. Almost a century after enfranchisement, women have been able to get everyday sexual abuse onto the political agenda. It may not stay there, but even assuming it does, we must still ask why it took so long. The answer is not that we have only just thought of it. Sexual abuse has been an issue for women's movements since at least the nineteenth century. It is a crucial impediment to women's political activism and, as such, a barrier to democratic politics.

Slow change: the presence of women in democratic politics

The proportion of women in senior decision-making positions grows only slowly, if at all. Globally in the ten years to 2018, the percentage of women ministers grew by 2 per cent, of senior women managers by 1 per cent and the proportion of women in senior posts in information and communications technology fell by 6 per cent. Slowness also characterises the rise in women's share of legislative seats. This highly visible measure of equality is relatively easy to track. The proportion of women in the national legislature of a country has become a standard measure of their political equality, used by academics and international organisations such as the United Nations (UN), the World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) amongst others. It is a highly visible symbol of women's political status and a useful indicator of underlying political processes. An inspection of this measure shows long periods of stagnation after the first suffrage elections in the 'old' democracies—even in the exceptional Scandinavian states. By the end of the 1990s, progress in most of the old democracies was steady, if not spectacular. Meanwhile, many of the new democracies, which were often established with quotas of women legislators as part of their founding constitution, made rapid progress and were described as having a fast track to equality.[9]

From the first elections with universal suffrage, it took Sweden thirty-two years and Denmark forty-eight years to get more than 10 per cent of women in their legislatures. These were the frontrunners. For the Netherlands, the figure was sixty years, while for the majoritarian systems of the USA, the UK and Australia, it took sixty-nine, seventy-two and ninety-three years respectively.[10] Thereafter, the numbers increased more rapidly, but as of 2018 only thirteen states have ever crossed the 40 per cent threshold of women's presence in the national legislature. Of these, only the four Nordic countries are classified as fully democratic in the Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index.

So, even after decades of struggle and despite significant progress, women are not yet politically equal in democratic states. They are rarely present in legislatures in proportion to their numbers in the population, their issues are rarely given legislative priority. Moreover, in terms of political representation, democracy does not seem to deliver for women. At the beginning of 2018, only one of the top five countries in terms of the presence of women in the legislature is a democracy and in only two countries, Rwanda and Bolivia, neither of which are democracies, are women more than 50 per cent of legislators.

At the beginning of this century, it was plausible to argue, as Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart did, that gender equality and democratisation were linked and that the proportion of women in the legislature was good

evidence of that link. There was something in their claims. The data on women's presence in national legislatures show growth both in the proportion of women and in the number of legislatures. Between 1945 and 1985 the number of legislatures worldwide rose from twenty-six to 136 and the percentage of women deputies in them rose from 3 per cent to 12 per cent, falling slightly by 1995 when women were 11.6 per cent of 176 legislatures. By 2005, women were 15.9 per cent of 184 parliaments and by 2015 women were 22.1 per cent of 188 national legislatures.[11]

Although the number of democracies did increase over the period, many of the new legislatures were not in democratic systems or were in 'less' democratic systems. If we think in terms of different levels of democracy, then the pattern changes. Drude Dahlerup has demonstrated that there is no correlation between levels of democracies as measured by standard indices and levels of women's political representation as indicated by the presence of women representatives at national level.[12] But measurements do illuminate some dimensions of women's status in different political systems. As mentioned above, there are numerous indices that attempt to rank and track democratic systems. These should be read in conjunction with various gender indices that attempt to measure, rank and track women's equality. The questions raised by this process are tricky. Meaningful comparison of different political systems requires some agreement about which are more and which are less democratic. Some 193 countries have elected parliaments or legislatures on which most of them base more or less plausible claims to be democratic. In short, the evidence is messy, complicated by the fact that assembling it requires confronting a still widely accepted public–private divide that obscures power relations between women and men.

The democracy indices on the whole start with political institutions and restrict consideration of the status of women to suffrage and political candidacy. They do not consider the underlying private spheres of inequality that pretty much determine access to the public spheres of work and politics. By contrast, the gender equality indices start from the social position of women and treat political inclusion as a part of that, one of many variables. Moreover, taken by itself, although the presence of women in the national legislature is a useful pointer and the tables of representation produced by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) are a valuable resource, many of the listed countries are not actually democracies.

Analysis of the available data shows that highly rated democratic institutions are not a reliable predictor of women's representation. The top five countries for women legislators at national level in 2018 were Rwanda at 61.3 per cent, Bolivia 53 per cent, Cuba 49 per cent, Nicaragua 47 per cent and Sweden 43.6 per cent.[13] While the top ranking countries in the Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index do relatively well in terms of women's presence in legislatures, they are not among the highest ranking legislatures in terms of the presence of women, as the table below shows.

Country	Economist Intelligence Unit Democratic Index ranking	% women MPs	Ranking in IPU table of percentages of women legislators in 193 countries, December 2017.
Norway	1	41.4%	10
Iceland	2	38.10%	18
Sweden	3	43.6%	5
New Zealand	4	38.3%	16
Denmark	5	37.4%	22
United Kingdom	14	32% (HC)	39
United States of America	21	19.4% HR 21% Senate	99

We can also assess how rankings of democracy map onto international gender equality indices. The annual UN Human Development Report routinely includes a gender equality index. Its top five ranked countries in 2015 were Switzerland, Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden and Iceland, only one of which is in the top five of the Inter-Parliamentary Union list of proportions of women in legislatures (IPU rankings were 35, 22, 26, 5, 18 of 193).

Analysing the status of women in representative democracies is an enormous undertaking, raising questions about presence and outcomes that make sense only in comparison to the many types of democratic and other political systems and to other points in history. Political inequalities between women and men are not only protected by centuries of tradition and powerful institutions, they are rooted in private life, in arrangements designed for reproduction and the preservation of property and so on, and seemingly in biological certainties whereby sex is binary, motherhood is a natural phenomenon, but fatherhood more of a rational, legal construct, until recently difficult to prove, but always important to the social order.

The main advantage of democratic systems for feminists is that they afford opportunities for mobilisation that in turn afford opportunities to bring women's issues to the political agenda. This is an important consideration but, as we have seen, one that works pretty slowly and against consistent resistance. Nevertheless, feminists have acted to reshape democratic practices in mobilisations and interventions at international, national and local levels. Frustration with slow progress has generated repeated mobilisations to secure women's political inclusion. Feminists have struggled not only for women's presence in legislatures, but also to place the promotion of women's interests on political agendas.

Substantive representation: women's policy agendas

Struggles for policy influence and representation (or presence) are intertwined. Feminist demands for institutional innovation range from the

establishment and empowerment of equality committees and commissions to provision for mandatory quotas of women representatives in political institutions. Over decades of activism, new layers of organisation have been inserted into established structures and new processes inside organisations have been designed to secure the position of women's advocates. The interventions have led to some reshaping of institutions. Political parties have changed their candidate selection rules, practices and institutions. Interest groups have extended their agendas. Governments have altered systems of rules about campaign finance that penalised parties when they did not present women candidates to electorates. Government departments have been required to 'gender mainstream' their policies and feminise their establishments and government itself has become more feminised in both membership and issue concerns. The issues ranged across the public and private spheres, taking in equal pay, gender-based violence, reproductive rights, equal opportunity, family law, education, social benefits and political representation itself.

The changes are well illustrated by two examples: the movements to establish quotas of women candidates and legislators, and use of direct action, including the creation of alternative institutions to draw attention to the lack of accountability to women that characterises so many supposedly democratic political institutions. While the quotas campaigns targeted institutional reform, direct action claiming accountability to women either bypassed or subverted established institutions to draw attention to women's demands and to raise public awareness of women's claims.

The introduction and implementation of quotas of women political candidates nicely encapsulates aspects of both descriptive and substantive political representation. The quotas movement was a massive challenge to the rules of the game, as they upset long established power relationships that determine who decides who are political representatives. Feminists gradually persuaded equality advocates that the only way to increase women's political representation was to mandate it. This process of persuasion involved a significant power struggle that is still not settled in many countries. In terms of practice, the issues are about power. The power to select is valued by party leaders and members and has long been an arena of political struggle. In the old democracies, that struggle is mainly located in the political parties. While in general, parties of the left have been more responsive than parties of the right, both were sites of continuing struggle. The process is well illustrated by the British Labour party where, from the 1970s, successive party debates took place on the issue of equality of women's political representation. Concessions were won piecemeal as the party first agreed that there should be at least one woman on each constituency shortlist from which candidates are selected, building up gradually until the party agreed that there should be all woman shortlists in selected constituencies, thus ensuring a woman would be nominated there. As the policy was implemented, it became clear that the allocation of shortlists must take account of how likely the party

was to win the seat in question, as it was much easier to persuade constituencies that had no chance of winning the seat to take on an all-woman shortlist. The method of candidate selection gradually changed to accommodate higher and higher targets of women in the parliamentary Labour party. Resistance was a continuing feature of the implementation process, ranging from refusal to implement the policies to more subtle means of undermining the intentions of the quotas. For example, opponents ridiculed the policies and the women who came forward. A common strategy of opponents was to shortlist women who were inexperienced and would not be nominated, even when experienced and qualified women were available. Legal challenges were made to the policy, which was suspended between 1995 and 2001 when a fall in the number of women MPs led to the passage of the Sex Discrimination Political Candidates Bill that made the use by political parties of quotas of women candidates legal, though it did not require it. In France, the quota debate was similarly protracted but there, the solution was to set targets sanctioned by financial penalties delivered via party finance laws and the disqualification of electoral lists that did not meet the targets. Thus, key mechanisms were different, reflecting different political institutions. In both countries, it was not enough simply to nominate women: they had also to be elected. These are examples of change in one of the core institutions of a democratic system brought about by conscious and wilful feminist intervention. Even so, in both countries there was fierce and protracted resistance to the implementation of the quotas.

We can expect resistance to any policies that challenge the gendered order. Whilst there are many difficulties in identifying women's political interests, there is general agreement that some issues are of particular concern to women. These include the gender pay gap, sexism, childcare, gender-based violence, reproductive rights and political representation itself. Yet, public policy debates about these issues were not framed in terms of women's rights or sex equality. For example, equal pay and opportunities policies were framed as a matter of business efficiency, while violence to women was framed in terms of family policy or child protection. These are examples of what Judith Squires calls rhetorical entrapment whereby the frames used to argue effectively for a policy result in a dilution and redirection of a policy away from the purposes for which it was proposed.[14] Such processes reduce women's benefit from the policy by undermining their autonomy and, yet again, raise the question of how accountable are democratic political institutions to women.

In its narrowest procedural sense, the idea of accountability has implications for inclusion and responsiveness and is therefore of concern to feminists. The institutions of accountability are mechanisms that secure account-giving by representatives and holding to account by the represented. Accountability, therefore, is the overarching principle through which the political agenda, laws and policies are kept aligned with citizen's views, opinions and interests. The power to hold decision makers to account is thus crucial. Feminists seem to

lack access to the most common institutions of accountability. In general, elected representatives tend not have a clear mandate about how to act concerning women's issues and interests. As a consequence, women are not explicitly considered to be a group to whom decision makers should be accountable. Even though women are the majority of the population, they are required to organise and act politically on their issues from the position of the marginalised outsider.

The way the electoral system works not only masks the elitist and gendered bias of the political agenda, it also conceals the fact that formal accountability is mainly to the dominant groups in society, in this case privileged men. It is so precisely because of the way that their interests shaped and shape political institutions. Even though tools such as equality committees, equal opportunities commissions and equality ministries were established to secure attention to women's issues, these tend to be weak and underfunded, marginal to accountability processes, and forced to rely on strategies that result in assimilation. To date, they do not provide women in society the means to secure effective accountability. Moreover, they are tilted towards educated white working women whose policy interests most coincide with the dominant elites, leaving stranded the concerns of poor and uneducated women and women of colour, and precluding the possibility of meaningful social equality.[15]

Quota advocates were able to work within political parties because they showed how parties could benefit from appealing to women voters. They were able, against considerable resistance, to take part in the political process. But many issues that are of importance to women are not amenable to institutional interceptions—precisely because the relevant decision making is not treated as a matter for public debate. This goes back to the arguments about the sexual contract and the invisibility of embodiment and the private sphere discussed above. The public world does not easily accommodate issues about reproductive rights and gender-based violence, yet routine policy decisions have a huge impact on women's experiences.

The whole official apparatus of accountability so beloved of democratic theorists is in practice littered with the obstacles that protect insiders. Feminists have responded by claiming accountability to women mainly from outside the formal institutions. Feminist organisations and movements operate to make claims for women, in this sense securing a form of accountability that operates via public perceptions. They bypass representative institutions and processes by shifting the arenas in which issues are raised and discussed. Hence, in their search for power to hold the political system to account, feminists are denied effective access to the formal political institutions, if only because they were designed to protect other interests. They therefore seek alternative ways to mobilise in civil society in order to demonstrate their political needs, to mobilise opinion and bring external pressure to bear. Often direct action strategies are used in conjunction with the creation of alternative institutions. Examples are innovations such as

rape crisis lines and women's refuges that later become incorporated into official policy. Such tactics, while not exclusive to feminists, have been used since the earliest waves of feminism. Think, for example, of the suffrage demonstrations, or about the French manifesto of 343, in which 343 prominent and difficult to prosecute women claimed, in a manifesto published in the news magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur* (now known as *L'Obs*) on 5 April 1971, to have had an abortion—an effective intervention in the French abortion legalisation debates of the time. Other examples include the Reclaim the Night marches of the 1980s in Europe and the USA, the Everyday Sexism Project website and the various hashtag campaigns including #MeToo and #TimesUp. In 2017 and 2018, there were women's marches across the globe protesting inequality, sexual harassment and abuse. Women in politics provide other examples. Recently, some feminists have taken to social media to subvert the masculine dominance of legislative institutions. Frustrated by inaction over complaints of sexual harassment in UK politics, women MPs, party activists and journalists have publicised their complaints about sexual abuse by male politicians and officials. In 2015, forty women political journalists in France published a manifesto decrying the sexism to which they were subjected in the course of their jobs. In 2017, some 140 women in California politics publicly announced widespread sexual harassment in the #WeSaidEnough campaign. There were similar campaigns in the US Congress and Senate. In the same year in the UK, #LabourToo began to collect testimonies of abuse faced by women in the party.[16]

Powerful, moving and influential, these are activities of political outsiders, evidence that on many issues of male privilege, women cannot rely on access to formal power to hold decision makers to account. They are forced to prompt accountability by other means.

Discussion: the masculine bias of political institutions

The examples suggest that women are still not citizens on the same terms as men. True, many groups of men lack access to the levers of political power, but it is not simply because they are men. Their bodies do not disqualify them from political activity or consideration. Disqualifiers for men are mainly about class and territory, barriers that women also experience. While women can become representatives and do achieve success in changing public policy in their favour through various means, they face additional obstacles simply because of their sex. The successes have not brought equality with men; they have been a long time coming and they always fall short of what is needed.

Thus, after decades of struggle, successive generations of women have not achieved political equality, even in the most democratic states. No set of institutions, including those with inclusion mechanisms such as quotas designed to ensure women's representation, guarantees the equal presence of women in democratic decision making. While things are not as bad as

once they were, improvements have been slow. Change is impeded by resistance built into the institutions. Once in positions of power as representatives, women find themselves facing agendas that include issues of policy that will greatly affect women and also their other constituents. There will be established ways of dealing with the decision processes, including conventions, rules, patterns of alliance and coalition building that have proved to be effective over time in the institution. Mostly, the interests of constituents, including women constituents, are best served by playing by the rules, mobilising logics and frames that are part of the institutional culture, thus reinforcing the logic of the institution.

Women therefore face two obstacles in their quest for equality. First to make progress, they are required to play by rules of the established order. As they learn and use the rules, they become assimilated, weakening their ability to pressure for change. Second, their goals are not achievable without comprehensive system change. Indeed, change is not actually enough. What is needed is a paradigm shift whereby roles and institutions are reimagined and re-engineered. While feminists have offered transformative ideas about democratic politics and challenges to male privilege which provide a vision of democratic equality, such visions are challenges to the dominant group, are alien to the hierarchical cultures of politics, and almost impossible to put into practice. Thus, women's advocates are required to settle for relatively limited regulatory innovation in institutions that are well able to preserve their systems of domination. It is doubtful that sufficient institutional change to permit women's political equality has been, or can be achieved, in the face of such deep rooted political masculinity. It is not clear what, if anything, women should do about it.

We should not be surprised. The notion that the presence of women would automatically bring any necessary institutional adjustments so that women could take their place and perform their duties as representatives has repeatedly been shown to be false. And so, it continues. As more democracies were founded, versions of the old institutions were borrowed, sometimes apparently subconsciously, complete with their inbuilt masculine biases. Even in the case of newly created institutions designed with sex equality in mind, the rules and habits of practices from elsewhere contaminate the new arrangements. Thus, the equalities advocates among the founders of the Scottish Parliament were disappointed to see adversarial Westminster habits and ways of doing politics soon establish themselves at Holyrood.[17] An apparent naturalness of masculine dominance is hardwired into our thinking and part of the DNA of our organisations.[18]

The feminist struggle for women's inclusion came late in the day for democracies. Women sought inclusion in imperfect institutions that were designed to represent particular types of men and were imbued with the norms of dominant masculinity. In order to be included, incomers were required to mobilise according to well established practices that were designed to protect and insulate insiders. Inclusion entailed continuing

power struggles in which the most successful strategies risked assimilation. In short, democratic institutions based as they were on agreements about exclusion and inclusion, already had inbuilt structures of resistance that could be and were mobilised against women.

Conclusions

Representative democracies vary; they feature diverse institutions and practices that have changed over time. The position of women in these institutions has also changed. The presence of women in democracies is contextually sensitive; some institutions are more women friendly than others. But research shows that no combination of institutions is both necessary and sufficient to ensure equality of political representation. Such variables as democratisation, the overall level of political development, the extent to which the culture of a country or region is egalitarian or secular, the degree of women's labour market participation and inclusion—and in the brokerage occupations in particular, the presence of women in public leadership, levels of political conflict and stability, the type of electoral system, the use of quotas of women, the type of party system, the type of party organisation affect but *do not fully explain* the level of women's political representation.[19]

Does democracy enhance equality for women? The answer is that the idea of democracy does but its institutions may well not. Nevertheless, feminists have benefitted from strong democracy. Arguably, the very existence of the feminist movement depends on its basic guarantees. While claiming inclusion, rights and policy preferences, feminists draw on their rights as citizens to make fundamental criticisms of democratic theory and practice and demand major reforms to its institutions.[20] Many feminists adopt democratic rhetoric to claim that their movements enhance democratic politics by virtue of the fact that they seek inclusion of more than half the population.

This discussion of women's political status in democratic systems is necessarily partial, but I am confident that the mixed and sometimes depressing picture it presents is broadly accurate. On one hand, women have made real progress in the institutions of the most democratic states. This progress has permitted institutional reform and political change that is supportive of further improvements in equality as decision makers mandate quotas of women on company boards, equal pay audits and promotion opportunities in the private sector. On the other hand, progress has been resisted, delayed and distorted in institutions that have not adapted effectively to the inclusion of women. Only recently, the World Economic Forum extended its prediction of the end of the economic gender gap from 2133 until 2234. On some indicators, more democratic systems have been slower than their less democratic counterparts to include women and women's concerns, although in more autocratic systems, inclusion may be more likely to be only symbolic.

The conceptions of politics that feminists proposed in the citizenship and difference debates of the 1980s and 1990s were advanced to support transformative goals of autonomy, self-regulation and diversity that could be realised only by probably unsustainable forms of intensive participation and direct democracy. Can democratic institutions be reformed such that they are equally hospitable to women and men? Or, especially now, when democratic institutions so often seem ineffective, should women put their considerable political energies to more productive use? Can democracy be re-gendered or must we start all over again incorporating feminist theories of political transformation into a newly imagined political system? Would such a re-gendered system be a recognisable variant of today's representative democracies? Could it bring the 'transformation of citizenship into friendship' envisaged by feminists in more optimistic times.

The political institutions that are labelled democratic were designed to accommodate divisions of territory, religion, class and ideology, all of which cross-cut gender. These differences have not gone away, but the assumptions about gender relations on which they are based are no longer accurate. Similarly, electoral systems are not designed to represent women as a group and representatives are not accountable to women. A further complicating problem is that while women's status as a group with some common interests arises from their bodies, they are (as are men) diverse and have conflicting interests as well. It is not difficult to see that any reformed system would be very much more complicated and potentially much less aggregative than any existing representative democracy. Here we have a problem—not of democracy, but of politics, which works better to aggregate demands when divisions are fewer. Although equality is a potentially unifying concept, the struggles to achieve it generate fragmentation and competition among different groups in what rapidly turns into a zero-sum game.

I have described a pattern of improvement. There is no doubt that legislatures have changed their practices in response to demands by women representatives.[21] I am, however, reluctant to conclude that a tipping point has been reached, for two reasons: first the pace of change is slow, particularly in the old democracies; second, the resistance has been and continues to be fierce. I am not even certain the pattern of very slow improvement will continue. That progress can be halted and reversed is evident in the recent restrictions on access to abortion in Poland and the USA. In addition, the structures of masculine dominance are intact and they remain well supported by an array of political institutions. A good example is the media treatment of Boris Johnson and Diane Abbott during and after the 2017 UK general election. Both were and are controversial characters, but while criticism of Johnson concentrated on his haphazard buffoonery, which may or may not be a suitable source of amusement, Abbott was and continues to be routinely subjected to appalling levels of sexist and racist abuse. Such abuse against women politicians is widespread. In the wake of the murder of

Jo Cox in 2016, many women MPs reported receiving routine abuse via Twitter and other social media.[22]

Why then should feminists support democracy? The standard answer is that it permits access to some of the resources needed to mobilise for change. Another answer is that there is no choice. Although we are not in a good place, we probably have no place else to go. But the current configuration of political arrangements is not guaranteed. More generally, while voter suppression, attacks on the judiciary, intolerance of minorities, increased violence all figure in recent assessments of democratic health, the continuing inequality of women has little purchase in the overall assessment made by watchdogs such as the Economist Intelligence Unit, Freedom House and Human Rights Watch—all organisations that are currently reporting serious threats to democracy. It seems that the relative absence of women is not thought to be much of a problem.

Moreover, democracies are steadily being displaced and their institutions outmanoeuvred by other kinds of organisations that are barely controlled by governments. It may be time to concentrate on what is coming next. Global corporations such as Amazon, Google and Facebook are assuming control of large parts of our lives. All the evidence is that they are, at best, very slow to prioritise ridding their companies of sexism; at worst, they are sexist organisations, many of whose senior employees take some pride in the exclusion and mistreatment of women.[23] As the division between public and private life gradually collapses, and as supposedly democratic political institutions continue to be unequal even as they are under increasing threat, are the structures of Silicon Valley a more urgent challenge for feminists than the difficult project of reforming democracies? If so, the challenge will be much the same as it is in representative democracies. The exclusion of women at the founding stages has likely produced institutional biases that require root and branch destruction followed by significant institutional re-engineering before sex equality is possible.

Notes

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