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Book Review: Seeing Women, Strengthening Democracy: How Women in Politics Foster Connected Citizens

Silvia Hudáčková*

HINOJSA, M. – KITTILSON, M.C.: *Seeing Women, Strengthening Democracy: How Women in Politics Foster Connected Citizens*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. 120p. ISBN 9780197526941.

When scholars and political practitioners argue for higher descriptive representation of women in politics, oftentimes the following argument is used: When young girls and women see female politicians in high political positions, it no longer appears to them as the men's business only, and, subsequently, they feel included and better represented. The mix of positive feelings such as empowerment that appears when citizens are being represented by similar people as themselves is called "symbolic representation" and was introduced by Hanna Pitkin (1967), and, therefore it has been long present in theory of political science and feminist scholarship.

Magda Hinojosa, Professor of Political Science and Director of the School of Politics and Global Studies at Arizona State University, and Miki Caul Kittilson, also Professor at the School of Politics and Global Studies and Associate Dean at the Arizona State University commence their book (p.32), by claiming that this theorem has been so far supported by studies with mixed results. The main question of their book is whether the presence of more women in prominent elected positions affects how citizens connect with their political systems. They also aim to look at gender differences of such effect - how do men and women react to increased female descriptive representation?

The monograph opens up with an introductory chapter dedicated to the main research puzzle and the main findings of the monograph. Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework linking descriptive to symbolic representation

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– the authors present expectations about how increasing descriptive representation elicits change of women and men towards politics, because women can suddenly see politics is not only for men. In the third Chapter, the authors present political representation in Latin American countries from the gender point of view and they argue why they choose the case of Uruguay for further study. The fourth Chapter focuses on the Uruguayan case in more detail, authors explain what data they gathered and how they are about to proceed in the analysis. In the fifth Chapter, the main analysis takes place – the authors examine how women’s increased presence in Uruguayan Senate shapes gender differences in political knowledge, interest, discussion etc. The authors follow by presenting results – the causal link between the increased descriptive representation of women and their higher political engagement and trust. Chapter 6 examines changes in men’s and women’s trust in elections and their support for democracy in Uruguay. The concluding Chapter no. 7 debates policy implications of the book and also informs readers about a sudden drop of women’s engagement and trust few years after elections.

Studies indicate that men are more likely to participate in political acts such as attending protests, signing petitions, joining parties and they are also more knowledgeable about politics. The authors argue that political engagement is gendered, and that, in general, women are less interested and less engaged in politics than men are. However, does it change if suddenly the descriptive representation of women sharply increases?

The book focuses on Latin American countries where the presence of women in politics has been increasing due to almost universal application of gender quotas. Hinojosa and Kittilson ask in the book whether such changes translate into better political connectedness and political support of women and men for their political system. They contend that when citizens are represented by people like them, they foster a sense of belonging to the political system. The main aim of this scholarly contribution is to examine variables on political engagement and political support to distinguish what strengthens the connections between male and female citizens and the political process.

In order to do so, the authors examine Latin American countries to find the best case to test the above-mentioned theory. They focus on Latin American countries because they have been surveyed by LAPOP (The Americas Barometer by the Latin American Public Opinion Project) for a long period of time and these surveys provide them with cross-national data on political participation, political engagement, and support of citizens. Among them, the

Uruguayan case has been chosen as an ideal case because of 1) the application of the quota went unnoticed by the public 2) the timing of the LAPOP was shortly before elections. Authors also complemented LAPOP surveys with their own survey data in order to gain greater analytical leverage and surveyed Uruguayans shortly after the elections in 2014. Thus, they obtained survey data of political engagement and political support from before, after, and long after the 2014 Uruguayan elections.

Hinojosa and Kittilson argue that higher political connection of citizens to the political system is a key to well-functioning and stable democracy. The political connection is manifested as political knowledge, political discussion, political efficacy, and interest in politics. When citizens are engaging with politics, they can form positive feelings towards the democratic political system.

Further on, the authors claim that gradual increase in female representation would not elicit changes towards the political system as the public would not notice it. The increase must be sudden and large enough and it also needs to be visible to link descriptive with symbolic representation in citizen's minds. They propose a Visible Cue Theory of Representation stating that citizens simply need to see the change in descriptive representation to react to it symbolically. "...visible cues send the signal to women that politics is not just for men" (p. 46). Hinojosa and Kittilson claim that the increase of women among the 30 members of the Uruguayan Senate (which is more prominent than the Lower House) couldn't have gone unnoticed as the number of women there doubled. They confirm the signal has arrived to citizens with data from panel survey and from fresh respondents, too. People did see an increase in female representation, albeit the perceived change in descriptive representation was not too dramatic.

However, when it comes to gendered representation, it is not only the actual increase in female representation that can elicit positive sentiment of citizens towards the higher representation of women - it could be also the application of the quota itself. The authors argue that "...These effects can only happen in the context of visible gender quotas (p. 47)." To rule this effect out, Hinojosa and Kittilson tested various data to explore to which extent the introduction of gender quota was perceived by the public. They asked the respondents in their panel survey about the existence of the quota, interviewed elites, conducted content analysis through media monitoring of TV and press, and looked into coverage on social networks. They arrived at the conclusion that the introduction of the quota went largely unnoticed by the Uruguayan public.

It is debatable whether gradual increase in descriptive representation elicits no change in symbolic representation. Provided that women would one day gradually reach parity in political institutions and the public would not notice, is simply too pessimistic. In order to conduct their study, Hinojosa and Kittilson needed a noticeable jump in women's representation to measure an effect and they found it in Uruguay where the gender quota had been introduced in 2009 and came to effect in 2014 legislative elections, resulting in doubling the representation of women in the Senate from 12.9 % to 25.8 %.

Later on, the authors "examine how women's presence shapes gender differences in political interest, knowledge, discussion, and citizen's perceptions of their own efficaciousness (p. 95)." For each variable, the authors compare citizens' responses in the panel survey before and after 2014 elections and follow up with measuring gender differences, too, in order to see how men and women react. After bivariate regressions authors use multivariate analyses to support their results where they control for how much respondents pay attention to news, their education, income, age, marital status, left-right ideology, and religious service attendance.

Then Hinojosa and Kittilson examine how female citizens connect with politics and how they trust and support the political system in the context of sudden higher female representation. They start their analysis by surveying trust in elections before and after elections. Before the elections, men trusted elections significantly more. After the elections, the overall trust has grown for both genders, but women have closed the gap. Secondly, they measured trust in the Parliament. Before elections, women trusted the Parliament more, but this difference was not significant. After the elections authors measured the support for Senate and the Lower House separately and concluded that for both chambers the overall support grew among men and women, however, women's support grew more and became significantly larger. The same pattern was measured also for the support of political institutions and pride in the political system. Regarding the satisfaction with democracy, the pattern was different - it remained the same before and after elections and the differences between genders was insignificant. Overall, before the elections, there were almost no differences in levels of support for the political system, but after the elections, the support of women grew significantly more in almost all instances.

Hinojosa and Kittilson worked hard to separate the effect of quota introduction from the effect of the increase of women's descriptive representation. They have also controlled for a number of factors such as level

of education, income, political ideology, etc. However, I contend there were other political events that happened in Uruguay which might have conflated the effects of variables in the model. Kittilson and Hinojosa admit that respondents who support the winners of an election are unsurprisingly more satisfied with the way democracy works. They also argue that they did not measure support for the officeholders as they surveyed respondents immediately after elections, just before the newly elected parliament took office (p.110). I wish to challenge this claim, as citizens did not need to wait for the new parliamentary session. The old government won the elections and citizens knew immediately what they can expect from the election result, as they had experienced the governance during years prior to the elections.

There were also other aspects, which should have been taken into consideration, but were instead overlooked by the authors. Policies that increase social security usually have a higher impact on women's lives and I would expect the book looked more into the Uruguayan political situation and separated the effect of social policies introduced by the leftist government embodied in the party Frente Amplio (Broad Front), from the effect of increased women's representation. The authors correctly expected people who supported the election winners to become more content with the democracy in Uruguay and they controlled for it - they included leftist ideology in the multivariate analysis and have found it significant every time. I find this controlling insufficient because it could be inaccurate - people might have voted for the Broad Front not only because they self-identify as leftists. There are other possible explanations for their support - for instance, their support for governmental policies such as continuing stability, higher social security, and higher safety experienced.

Generally, when the authors measured the effect before and after the elections on various variables, the data showed an increase for both men and women, but women reacted more positively. It might well be the case that the public was simply content that the popular government won again with the promise to further pursue social policies that, according to the media, helped to reduce poverty and inequality and increased safety on the streets. This alternative explanation would also be in line with the sudden decrease of political connectedness and political trust that occurred among women in 2019 before elections. In their second term, the government led by the Broad Front had not delivered on its policy promises and it was defeated in 2019 elections. The authors reported that in the 2019 numbers of women's engagement and

trust got in the old tracks, lagging again behind male's engagement and trust. What if the positive response of the public (and especially women) to democratic system after the elections was mainly a manifestation of their happiness about the electoral result? And the higher political connection and political trust to the democratic political system that women reported, was a manifestation of support to policies that were largely to their benefit?

Hinojosa and Kittilson have nevertheless strongly supported the introduction of gender quotas with their book, showing that a higher number of women in the office "alters how female citizens engage with the political process and connect to their governments" (p.126). If the visible gains in female descriptive representation after the elections communicate to the public that politics became a game for both men and women, female citizens become more politically engaged themselves. If the quality of democracy is improved by greater diversity of political representatives, it would be much more difficult to object to gender quotas because they deliver common good for everyone living under democratic political systems.

In public debates we often hear that it is not the actual gender of politicians that matters, it is the subscription to gender equality by representatives that is crucial. We often hear women do not perceive themselves as a distinctive minority group, and, therefore, they are not politically organizing and advocating for themselves. Hinojosa and Kittilson have supported the notion that women indeed react differently to political cues and seeing politicians with similar identity as theirs in high political positions matters to them. They have supported the concept of symbolic representation's existence and that it needs to be taken seriously.