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“Which Men?” How an Intersectional Perspective on Men and Masculinities Helps Explain Women’s Political Underrepresentation

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Progress toward gender equality in politics is striking. With the help of electoral gender quotas in more than 130 countries, women’s national legislative representation more than doubled in the last 20 years. Other historically marginalized groups — racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, immigrants, and indigenous peoples — are also increasingly making their way into our parliaments. Political institutions are, then, more inclusive today than they have ever been. Yet equal representation has not been fully realized: some marginalized groups have seen a decline, and men from dominant social and economic groups — hereafter “elite men” — remain numerically dominant. Globally, there are no known cases in which elite men do not hold a disproportionately high share of positions in national elective office (Hughes 2015).¹

To make sense of these patterns, gender and politics scholars have increasingly studied the ways in which gender intersects with race, ethnicity, and other social categories to shape women’s descriptive representation. Here, we suggest that adopting an intersectional approach to *men’s* overrepresentation also has much to offer. Revealing that it is only some men who are universally overrepresented in politics helps us better understand ongoing gender inequality. Drawing here on two cases — India and the United Kingdom — we further contend that gender quotas

1. We use the term “elite” to include a range of racial, ethnic, religious, caste, and caste groups that have social and/or economic privilege.

are critical in illuminating and combating the gatekeeping practices that maintain elite men's political power.

AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH TO MEN AND POLITICS

The term “intersectionality” was first introduced by Crenshaw (1989) to better understand how forces of oppression intersect in complex ways to shape the experiences and outcomes of black women in the United States. Since then, intersectionality has been applied to a broad range of intersecting social hierarchies — not just race and gender but also class, ethnicity, religion, nationality, indigeneity, sexuality, and so on (McCall 2005). Gender and politics research has followed this path, asking “which women” are represented in our political institutions (Smooth 2011). Taking seriously women's differences and inequalities among them begs questions about the nature of material, cultural, and political barriers to equal representation; draws attention to new explanations for gender inequality; and shifts recommended solutions.

Intersectionality is not only the study of multiple oppressions. It is also about the ways in which individuals experience privilege and marginalization. Indeed, gender and politics research reveals that women from racial, ethnic, and religious minority groups are not universally underrepresented relative to other groups (Hughes 2011). The perceived threat to elite men's power posed by ethnic and religious minority men can make women particularly desirable representatives of some ethnic minority groups (Celis et al. 2014). Still, differences among men have received little systematic attention from gender and politics scholars.

Intersectionality research can draw from men and masculinities research, which for decades has explicitly theorized power differences among men. Men are seen as occupying varying positions in social hierarchies and, simultaneously, as constrained and enabled by their identities and statuses. Given hegemonic masculinity ideologically legitimates the subordination of women, this literature also points to the ways that inequalities among men might contribute to inequalities between men and women (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Unfortunately, however, research has generally not considered the extent to which different groups of men have varied access to elected office or why.

Here, we suggest that politics and gender scholars should bridge these approaches, drawing insights from intersectionality scholarship and from men and masculinities research to interrogate “which men” are

represented in politics. To illustrate, we focus on quota debates in India and the United Kingdom.

IF WOMEN WIN, WHO LOSES? DESCRIPTIVE REPRESENTATION AS A ZERO-SUM GAME

Our first case is India, where caste, tribe, religion, and gender are all politically salient. Quotas have a long and contested history in India, tracing back to the early 1900s. But only reserved seats for Scheduled (low-ranking) Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SCSTs) survived India's transition to independence. Whether to extend quotas in the national legislature to Muslims, other disadvantaged castes (called Other Backward Classes, or OBCs), and women has been bitterly disputed, and quota debates reveal much about power dynamics in Indian politics.

Legislators formally introduced a national gender quota in 1996. The Women's Reservation Bill would reserve one-third of seats, including SCST seats, for women. Notwithstanding widespread public support of the bill and successful local gender quotas dating to 1993, opposition has at times reached fever pitch, with "some MPs almost coming to blows" and copies of the bill being torn up (Htun 2004, 448; see also Jensenius 2016; Randall 2006).

Of particular interest here is the zero-sum antiquota argument, which posits that a gender quota would benefit high-caste women at the expense of lower-caste and Muslim men. OBC men have been particularly vocal. For instance, in 1997, OBC party leader Sharad Yadav asked, "Do you think these women with short hair can speak for women, for our women" and dubbed this threatening group of elite women the "bobbed-hair brigade" (*The Hindu* 2015; see also Randall 2006). Although less vociferous, Muslim members of parliament (MPs) have expressed similar concerns.

Opposition of OBC and Muslim men to the quota for women distracts from the stark reality that upper-caste elite men are overwhelmingly overrepresented: upper-caste Hindus hold 45% of Lok Sabha seats, 5.6 times their population share; men hold 89% of seats, more than 1.7 times their share of the population. OBCs and Muslims, alternatively, have just 30% to 50% of the seats they would if they were proportionally represented, and their seat share has been declining over time, to less than 20% today (Jaffreot and Verniers 2015). Women hold just 11% of

seats, and their share of SCST seats is greater than their share of general seats.

By focusing on variation in men's descriptive representation, the overrepresentation of elite men in India comes into sharp focus. Numerically, elite men have the most to lose from a gender quota, but it is OBC and Muslim men who are leading the antiquota charge. Why? One explanation is that elite men's dominance is taken for granted, such that women's political advances are not seen as a credible threat to elite men's power but rather to marginalized men. If so, persistent underrepresentation of women in India may have little to do with women or their characteristics and qualifications; the culprit is the unquestioned and unchallenged political dominance of elite men.

Our second case is the United Kingdom, where some men politicians, commentators, and academics have become increasingly critical of women's descriptive representation, frequently on the grounds that it poses a threat to other marginalized groups. Women's gains — which in 2015 reached 30% in the House of Commons — are seen as coming at the expense of the representation of working-class men, who constituted only 5% of MPs (based on occupational data; Heath 2015). The expansion of women's representation is constructed as a zero-sum game between middle-class women and working-class men.

The pitting of middle-class women against working-class men has been most explicit during debates over all-women's shortlists (AWS), the Labour Party's gender quota used in 1997, and since the 2005 general election. In a January 12, 2012, parliamentary debate, a male Conservative Party MP, David Nuttall, challenged,

Does the hon. Lady agree that one of the biggest disadvantages a man from a working-class background in one of our large inner cities might face is the existence of all-women shortlists?

To which a Labour woman MP, Joan Ruddock, responded,

My hon. Friend [Anne Begg] might also say to the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) that historically it was the practice of the Conservative party to have all-male shortlists. What was the disadvantage to the men with manual skills in those all-male shortlists?

In her interjection, Ruddock posits that recruitment by the Conservatives was, and remains, classed and that this is revealed by the failure of working-class men to have been able to successfully negotiate these

institutions prior to the entrance of greater numbers of Conservative women, who even today are just 20% of Conservative MPs.

Turning to the Labour Party — 43% of its MPs are women — the accusation is even more explicit: AWSs directly prevent the selection of working-class men because men are excluded from some selections. At the individual level, this criticism has purchase: a particular working-class man might be ruled out because an individual constituency is classified an AWS (Childs 2004). Working-class men's chance of selection in open constituencies, though, has little to do with women's sex/gender and everything to do with the contemporary preference for the middle-class professional politician.

CONCLUSIONS

Much current research on women's representation is attentive to women's within-group differences, examining which women are present, why, and to what substantive and symbolic effect. We contend that by applying an intersectional approach to men's descriptive representation, different explanations for men's persistent overrepresentation come into sharper focus. Attention to the exclusion of some groups of men undermines arguments that the status quo is driven by biological sex differences — that men are “naturally” predisposed toward politics — or by men's collective merit. Instead, the lack of parity in politics is shown to be rooted in elite men's desire to maintain the political power and privilege that they have historically held on the basis of their gendered, raced, and classed positions.

If the reason for women's persistent underrepresentation is that elite men have power that they seek to protect, then interventions to redress gender imbalance also shift. The answer is not to increase women's education, skills, and resources. Gender quotas should not be regarded as compensation for women's political inadequacies but instead as a way to loosen elite men's grip on the legislative seats that are not “naturally” or “meritocratically” theirs. Men's opposition to gender quotas is hereby reconsidered: is it about quotas per se, or about quotas for women? In both our cases, we contend that zero-sum criticism is much less a principled call for the representation of other marginalized groups and more an antifeminist argument deployed to undercut women's claim on political power. Hostility is, then, not always toward group representation,

or necessarily against strong interventions, but rather toward quotas for women when they threaten elite men's political privilege.

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