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(De)constructing the Masculine Blueprint: The Institutional and Discursive Consequences of Male Political Dominance

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Men are overrepresented in most legislatures of the world. However, in parliaments in which women reach a "critical mass" or even approach parity with men in terms of numbers, they still must contend with and adapt to the symbolic representation of men. Using the cases of the Australian and Polish parliaments, we point to the need to deconstruct the parliamentary standard by shifting the theoretical and empirical focus from women's disadvantage in politics to problematizing men's advantage and power (Eveline 1994, 1998; Murray 2014). Rather than placing the problem and solution with women, we address the practices that maintain men's unearned power, or privilege. Privilege is the "systematically conferred advantages" that individuals enjoy by virtue of their membership of a dominant social group (Bailey 1998, 109). Institutions in the form of taken-for-granted practices and gendered discourses embed a "masculine blueprint" in political institutions that

legitimizes men's place as parliamentarians and privileges men, enhancing their power and advantage in the election process. By focusing on men's dominance, it becomes evident that sustaining gender inequality through practices and discourse advantages men as a group.

THE FEMINIST INSTITUTIONALIST APPROACH AND THE MASCULINE BLUEPRINT

Feminist institutionalism applies a gendered lens to the study of the political "rules of the game." While it acknowledges that gender varies across time, context, and institutions, feminist institutionalism highlights the interconnectedness and the gendered consequences of formal and informal rules, practices, and discourse as they relate to one another and political actors (Mackay, Monro, and Waylen 2009, 254). Formal rules aside, the study of these practices and discourses contributes to a deeper understanding of how gendered patterns of hierarchy and exclusion are performed and legitimized at the "seemingly trivial" level of interpersonal day-to-day interaction to privilege men (Mackay, Monro, and Waylen 2009, 257). Although they appear neutral, political practices are rarely modeled on the normative lives of women or their reproductive role but rather are shaped around male norms and masculine codes of behavior. As a result, political practices often have disparate gendered consequences for female and male actors (Gains and Lowndes 2014).

PRACTICING THE "MASCULINE BLUEPRINT"

In the context of the Australian Parliament, parliamentary practices are modeled on a "masculine blueprint." MPs are expected to demonstrate their reliability through their total availability to constituents and party challenges, even when they have just given birth (Remeikis and Ireland 2017). A practice of ignoring formal gendered policies, such as parental leave, reaffirms masculine norms. Women who choose to have a family are perceived as unreliable, while women who do not have a family are considered unqualified to run the country (Harrison 2007). "Female politicians are judged as women first and politicians second. For men it is always the opposite" (Kernot 2012). The gendered effect of this practice provides men with unearned advantage, at the cost of women's political legitimacy.

The masculine blueprint is etched into the physical fabric of the Australian Parliament, with a snooker room, a pool, a gym, and a bar, yet a child care center only emerged in 2008. Decades-long resistance to the construction of such a center reflected embedded and unquestioned expectations that political actors are all male and devoid of care responsibilities.¹

Inside Parliament, the practice of loud, aggressive, and combative behavior, with strong shades of sexism, is reflective of the hegemonic masculine code. Men who “perform” this type of behavior in Parliament can blend in and take advantage of their legitimacy as the norm. Even in relation to ministerial progression, an adherence to the “masculine blueprint” appears to be linked to notions of “merit” and “strong leadership.” Consecutive Australian male prime ministers have all drawn on a combination of aggression, larrikism,² and authority to position themselves as strong leaders (Simms 2013). They have not been carbon copies of one another, but all have employed elements of the masculine blueprint to strengthen their legitimacy as leaders. For women, attempts to model these masculine norms have been met with disapproval and sanction (Chappell 2002).

Yet women have not passively accepted these gendered rules. Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s “misogyny speech” that called out hegemonic masculine codes and sexism is a notable example. Repeatedly throughout her term as prime minister, Gillard’s gender was used by her opposition, Tony Abbott, to frame her as a dangerous liar — a “Lady Macbeth” who could not be trusted. Efforts by women, including Gillard, to challenge sexism have been met with fierce personalized, sexualized, and gendered backlash. The gendered effect of the masculine blueprint of aggression is to dissuade women from contemplating a career in politics, lessening the competition for men at preselection.

MASCULINE DISCOURSES RESULTING FROM MALE DOMINANCE

Narrowing down to the discourse of parliament in countries such as Poland, the dominant discursive position of men and power asymmetries

1. Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, June 24, 2008, 5777–86 (Anthony Albanese).

2. Larrikinism is an Australian term that refers to a “blokishness” that is good-natured and mischievous yet irreverent to authority. For a more detailed discussion, see Bellanta (2012).

are encoded in the political language. Hegemonic masculine codes pervade the standard of talking and debating between parliamentarians, with an overrepresentation of masculine descriptive and linguistic features. Hence, political debates mirror men's substantive overrepresentation. Melinda Adams and Michal Smrek (in this issue) argue that informal institutions vary across time and space; so do masculine discourses.

Sex and gender are often conflated in male-dominated political discourses. MPs routinely link women with femininity and associated ideas of beauty, delicacy, and mothering. Men in masculine codes are linked with leadership, which strengthens men's role as parliamentarians:

God, or nature, . . . created humans in such a way that the man is usually big and strong to defend the family and the woman is warm and caring to raise their children.³

Additionally, "benign" linguistic sexism, including addressing women as "dear ladies," "lovely (or beautiful) women," or kissing women's hands and holding the door for them, are "normal" behaviors in the Polish parliament. Accordingly, a Polish liberal-centrist MP told the parliamentary plenary,

Social and cultural roles change because 200 or 300 years ago, it was unimaginable that so many *beautiful and smart ladies* would sit in parliament.⁴

When female parliamentarians are singled out by men, the linguistic informality increases familiarity and infantilizes women, putting men in a higher power position.

Therefore, gendered discourses act in two ways. They are used to separate the sexes and tie them to specific gender characteristics, and they normalize men's gender power and political legitimacy. The effect of both practices is to validate power inequalities and gender stereotypes purporting them to be the "natural" (and healthy) order of things that must be protected.

3. "Pierwsze czytanie poselskiego projektu ustawy o świadomym rodzicielstwie" [First reading of the legislative proposal on informed parenting], *Sprawozdania stenograficzne z posiedzeń Sejmu*, Druk nr 562 [Parliamentary proceedings records, record no. 562], September 22–28, 2012, 56–96, at 67, <http://www.sejm.gov.pl/Sejm7.nsf/PorzadekObiad.xsp?documentId=3D58BD7DDA15B958C12579CF002FD237>.

4. "Sprawozdanie komisji o rządowym projekcie ustawy o ratyfikacji Konwencji Rady Europy o zapobieganiu i zwalczaniu przemocy wobec kobiet" [The report of the committee on the governmental legislative proposal concerning the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combatting violence against women], *Sprawozdania stenograficzne z posiedzeń Sejmu*, Druki nr 2515 i 2701 [Parliamentary proceedings records, records no. 2515 and 2701], September 24–26, 2014, 102–34, at 103, <http://www.sejm.gov.pl/Sejm7.nsf/PorzadekObiad.xsp?documentId=FFCFABC1AE88DB6DC1257BF1003740E9>.

Turning to the characteristics and formalities of language, male dominance also biases notions of appropriateness and superiority in politics. Specific uses of language and grammar perpetuate hegemonic gender constructions. Slavic languages are more explicitly gendered than English: almost every act of speech forces the specification of a grammatical gender through nouns, grammatical tense forms of verbs, adjectives, and so on. As a result of male overrepresentation in politics, language users are more accustomed, or simply prefer, to use the masculine grammatical gender when referring to standard positions/titles. Masculine proper nouns and pronouns are perceived as “gender neutral.” Despite having the grammatical option of creating female nouns corresponding to language needs (as has been done in German politics and public discourse), in Poland, a lexical gap blocks language users from doing so because of the lower social prestige and power position of female names and nouns. As a result of the male-standard association, female equivalents of nouns often seem trivialized, diminutive, or inappropriate. In fact, some Polish female MPs have fought against the use of female nouns in parliament, preferring the masculine noun that carries sociohistorical linguistic legitimacy:

[Call me] *poseł* [male MP]. Please do not call me *posłanka* [female MP]!⁵

However, feminists resist using “masculine nouns” when referring to women parliamentarians. They counter that such linguistic sexism perpetuates androcentric language and preserves the “default” parliamentarian as male. Thus, MPs using consistently feminine grammatical forms in the Polish parliament mean to make a feminist political statement.

CONCLUSIONS

We acknowledge that formal rules account for some of the disparity between men’s and women’s representation in parliament, yet this essay draws attention to the informal rules. We highlight the advantages of broadening the lens to focus on how normalized practices and discourses act to reinforce masculine privilege and men’s advantage. This essay

5. “Pierwsze czytanie poselskiego projektu ustawy o związkach partnerskich” [First reading of the legislative proposal on civil partnerships], *Sprawozdania stenograficzne z posiedzeń Sejmu*, Druki nr. 552–555 [Parliamentary proceedings records, records no. 552–555], January 23–25, 2013, 158–198, at 175, <http://www.sejm.gov.pl/Sejm7.nsf/PorzadekObrad.xsp?documentId=8F53A7CC6603329AC12579CF0030BEDB>

aimed to deconstruct and expose the purportedly “gender-neutral” institutional and discursive norms of parliamentary behavior. It advocated the importance of focusing on political inclusion, as well as exclusion. Focusing on the dynamics of inclusion provides insights into the way seemingly obvious and neutral practices and discourses reaffirm masculinity and men as the legitimate norm in politics. It demonstrates that existing practices and discourses stand as examples of the tacit acceptance of hegemonic masculine codes that operate to normalize men’s power over women. We recognize that an interrogation of the “boys’ club” rules in politics cannot come at the expense of a focus on women. We ask for both: a focus on the practices and discursive consequences that (re)produce male advantage, in addition to the analysis of women’s marginalization in politics.

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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.