Gender, Institutions and the Quality of Democracy: Engendering the ‘Crisis of Democracy’

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INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses some gender dimensions of the key theoretical and empirical problem explored by the Quality of Government Institute: how can high quality democratic political institutions be created and maintained. It is based on the assumption that a central characteristic of high quality democratic institutions is that they are ones in which all citizens regardless of race, class, gender sexuality are represented and can participate in on an equal basis. Historically women have participated politically in different ways to men with lower levels of representation; and gender and politics scholars have long been interested in analyzing how and why this is the case and what can be done to reduce the male dominance of the political arena in both long-standing and newer democracies.

At the same time, over the last couple of decades the perception has increased that many democracies are suffering a generalized crisis of representation, participation and legitimacy and that the overall quality of democracy has declined. The Economist (2014) for example claims that the dysfunctional elements of long-standing democracies such as gridlock in the US, disillusionment in the EU together with the impact of globalization, the power of the banks and international financial institutions (IFIs) have led to voter disengagement and lack of trust in politicians, in combination with important changes in party and party systems. Academics argue that these trends are visible as ongoing dealignment, the development of catchall parties and personalization of politics, providing further evidence of problems in contemporary representative democracies (Dalton 2004). But, while there may be some consensus about symptoms, there is far less agreement about causes and potential solutions that could ameliorate the crisis and improve the quality of democracy.

As part of this perceived crisis, the male domination of democracy – both in terms of its institutions and who participates – has been identified as both problematic, and in many ways emblematic, of the more generalized democratic crisis. By the same token, replacing the ‘male, pale and stale’ with more women has also been seen as a potential solution to
various contemporary political and economic problems, thereby improving the quality of
democracy. There are various reasons behind this: either because women are supposedly
less corrupt and more risk averse than men (for example, the benefits of ‘Lehmann Sisters’
versus ‘Lehmann Brothers’ touted in the financial sphere) or because their presence can
embody and symbolize a new and fresh style of politics (Agerberg et al. 2014; Prugl 2012).
This paper does not suggest that male dominance is responsible or that more women the
solution; rather it explores the gender dynamics of the perceived ‘crisis of democracy’.¹

The gendered aspects of the ‘crisis’ are notable in two ways. First there is a paradox.
On the one hand, it is incontrovertible that democracy still plays out multiple ways to
privilege predominantly white, elite, heterosexual men and to reinforce male dominance in
many contexts (Waylen et al. 2013). In 2011 on average only 20 per cent of legislators in
lower houses globally were women (IPU). Very few countries have parity or gender-
balanced cabinets and, despite prominent exceptions such as Angela Merkel the chancellor
of Germany and Christine Lagarde at the International Monetary Fund, few women head
national executives or prominent international bodies. On the other hand, there has been a
sharp increase in the numbers of women participating in democratic institutions over the
last two decades, leading some to claim that the ‘male monopoly’ over many political
systems and institutions has ended (Dahlerup and Leyenaar 2013). So we are seeing the
widespread discussion of women’s under-representation, at the same time as some women
appear to be making significant headway within electoral institutions. Second, it raises the
possibility that the ‘crisis of democracy’ may provide opportunities to further enhance
women’s political participation because the demands of those in favour of greater gender
equality in the public sphere and those looking for solutions to the ‘crisis’ appear to
coincide.²

How should we understand these developments? To assess both the extent to which
the male domination of politics is an important facet of the contemporary ‘crisis of
democracy’ and to explore whether the crisis offers opportunities to lessen male
dominance, we need to do two things. First we have to examine how far contemporary
democracies remain male dominated and assess the gendered significance of the changes
associated with the ‘crisis of democracy’ that we have seen recently. Is it still ‘business as
usual’ in gender terms? Second, we need to analyse the different measures that have been
advocated and implemented to reduce male dominance in democracies and assess their effectiveness. We will then be in a better position to speculate whether the ‘crisis’ offers opportunities to reduce the male domination of politics.

To facilitate this, the first part of this paper explores how democracy is gendered through a ‘gender audit’ of women’s descriptive and substantive representation within democratic institutions. It then analyses whether the contemporary ‘crisis of democracy’, often perceived as a crisis of representation, participation and legitimacy, is gendered in ways that are new or unexpected. Finally it discusses the effectiveness of some measures advocated to undermine the male dominance of politics in contemporary democracies. The empirical examples are drawn primarily from long-standing and newer democracies (both parliamentary and presidential) in Europe and Latin America. The paper uses a fairly narrow (mid-range) definition of democracy – a formal/procedural emphasis – and looks at both the formal and informal institutions/rules/norms of democracy. The focus is therefore on democratic institutions rather than on women’s movements/civil society outside those institutions, or on a more deliberative notion of democracy.

The paper argues that, despite the increased descriptive representation of women, democratic institutions remain deeply shaped by the same elements that informed early liberal theory. Therefore, to improve the quality of democracy, we need to do more than just ensure that even greater numbers of women of all races and classes – not just elite white women – are involved as actors at all levels of politics. We also need to change the institutions, both formal and informal, that are associated with democracy in order to promulgate democracies with enhanced levels of participation, representation and legitimacy. Thus, although it is possible to envisage women’s greater descriptive representation as a result of measures implemented as part of efforts to ameliorate the ‘crisis of democracy’, the more fundamental changes to democratic institutions that are necessary to ensure a better democracy for women, as well as other under-represented groups and minorities, and as a result a better democracy for all, are harder to imagine.

DEMOCRACY IN THEORY AND IN PRACTICE

There is now a huge literature on the complex relationship between gender and democracy showing that it is gendered in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways. Challenging the
gender blindness of political theory, feminist scholars first drew attention to the exclusionary ways in which democracy has been both theorized and operationalized, with the result that women and men were incorporated differently into democratic polities. Pioneering early work undertaken in the 1980s interrogated how the founding principles of liberal democracy were fundamentally masculinist (Elshtain 1989, Pateman 1983, 1989). Feminist political theorists focused on the gendered assumptions in three interlinked themes running through various conceptions of liberal democracy: the complex relationship between the public and private spheres; the notion of the individual; and the construction of citizenship. They showed that as a consequence of its theoretical roots, the ways in which democracies operated in practice were unlikely to offer women political equality and would have difficulty in dealing with notions of difference. As a result, even when women had achieved formal equality within liberal democracies, these polities could still exclude women in practice. Feminist political theorists such as Anne Phillips (1991) detailed the impact of these factors on the day-to-day operation of liberal democracies. For example, women’s roles in the public and private spheres as well and the ways in which they have been incorporated into citizenship resulted in significantly lower rates of participation by women in many democratic processes. Indeed, liberal democracy has found the empowerment of many disadvantaged and minority groups difficult to accommodate within its frameworks, because of its emphasis on the individual as the basic unit in political life (Young 1990). Yet at the same time Philips (1992: 82) has been loath to give up on liberal democracy, arguing that feminism can be used to inspire a more substantial version of liberal democracy.

Indeed, feminist political scientists in turn have considered whether democracies are more likely to implement gender equality policies than other types of political system. Tripp (2013: 516) argues that ‘simple cross-national bivariate regressions between regime type and broader measures of women’s status reveal a strong correlation between democracy and women’s status even controlling for economic growth’. Htun and Weldon (2010) also investigated whether regime type matters in the adoption of gender equality policies. Although the implementation of different forms of gender equality policies varies considerably and regime type is not always a predictor for this, the degree of democracy is one variable that predicts the effectiveness of the advocates advancing women’s rights.
Democracies tend to have more developed civil societies allowing women’s organizations greater influence. Scholars have also examined the extent to which transitions to democracy and post-conflict settlements can offer opportunities for the enhancement of women’s representation and gender equality policies, such as through the creation of new institutions and constitutions (Tripp 2014; Waylen 1994, 2007, 2014). Post-conflict states in Africa have higher rates of women’s representation than other African states that have not experienced conflict (Tripp 2014). Furthermore, in a similar vein to Tripp’s (2013) arguments about regime type and gender equality, Oscar Encarnación (2014) claims that ‘political regime is a better predictor of gay rights than either economic development or cultural factors such as religion’. Over the last decade, gay rights have deepened considerably in democracies – in contrast to many non-democracies – because of several mechanisms, including the presence of vibrant civil societies, the protection of citizenship, respect for the rule of law and a socially tolerant living environment. Therefore, while on the one hand historically excluding women, liberal democracies’ open civil societies and cultures of rights and citizenship can provide opportunities that do not exist in other political systems.

Having outlined liberal democracy’s complex theoretical underpinnings, we can now conduct a ‘gender audit’ of contemporary democracies, looking at how far men and women now participate and are represented (both descriptively and substantively) differently, and at the ways in which key political institutions are gendered. This will enable us to determine how far the legacies of early liberal democratic thinking – notions of the individual and the ‘political’ as profoundly masculine, the division between the public and private, and the gendered nature of citizenship – remain.

At a time when political participation (measured, for example, by voter turnout) has been declining and trust in politicians and political institutions has also been falling, women’s numerical presence in electoral institutions (‘descriptive’ representation) has increased. However, it is a mixed picture. Globally the trend has been away from male monopoly, and now only 19% of polities (including many non or semi-democracies but also Brazil and Japan) have fewer than 10% women in their representative bodies. The vast majority of democracies still exhibit ‘male dominance’, with between 10 and 40% female representation. In 46% of polities (including the US), women are in a small minority (10–
25%), and in nearly 30% – predominantly in Europe and Latin America – women are in a large minority (25-40%). But only around 5% of states are gender balanced with 40–60% female representation, most notably the Nordic states (an average of 42.3%) and some African countries, such as South Africa and Rwanda. Furthermore, although the legitimacy of all-male executives is often questioned, the ‘acceptable minimum’ in an executive varies and can still be as low as only one woman (Dahlerup and Leyenaar 2013).

Men therefore remain much more likely to become politicians than women. And in both newer and older democracies, it is elite women (in terms of class and race) who predominate among female representatives, with many other groups of women (and men) still under-represented. The factors explaining levels of women’s representation have sometimes been couched in terms of supply and demand (Norris 1993). The supply of male and female candidates differs, with more men coming forward, as women’s perceived roles in the private sphere – for example, caring responsibilities, experience and ambition – still affects their roles in the public sphere (Lawless and Fox 2010). And on the demand side, electoral rules also impact on the numbers of women becoming legislators. In the absence of effective electoral quotas, first past the post systems (FPTP) tend to have lower levels of female representation than more proportional (PR) electoral systems. Parties are more likely to choose balanced/diverse electoral lists in PR systems; and other factors such as district magnitude, rates of incumbency and the presence of open or closed electoral lists also play a part.

Political parties too, despite a perceived decline in their strength and influence, still play a central role. Long identified as key gatekeepers, they affect women’s participation and representation by determining candidate selection procedures, often displaying a preference for men (Lovenduski and Norris 1993). Women have faced difficulties in getting selected or were put into unwinnable seats or low down on party lists for legislative elections (Lovenduski and Norris 1993). Characteristics, such as party ideology, levels of institutionalization and centralization and the presence of women activists within all levels of party hierarchies, affect the numbers of women selected. In her study of European political parties in the 1990s, Caul (1999) found that left-wing parties tended to field more women candidates, as did parties with larger numbers of women in party executives. But over the last two decades, increased pressure to select women – whether from women
activists within parties, demonstration effects, or because parties want to increase their support from women voters – has contributed to the improvement in women’s descriptive representation. However, evidence that many different types of party still discriminate against women remains (Fortin-Rittberger and Rittberger 2014; Schwindt-Bayer and Wiesehemeier 2014).

Although gender scholars initially focused primarily on legislatures and candidate selection, recently they have become more interested in executives and party leadership positions (Jalalzai 2013, Krook and O’Brien 2012). The change is firstly because in most polities the locus of power sits with the executive rather than the legislature. Secondly, it is because there has been a real world increase in the numbers of women in executives. The number of women leaders has doubled over the last decade (Alexander and Jalalzai 2014). And more generally there has been a move away from female leaders with connections to political families (which has been particularly true in Asia – for example Indira Gandhi, Benazir Bhutto) to greater numbers of ‘self-made’ women politicians such as Dilma Rousseff (Brazil), Angela Merkel (Germany) and Michelle Bachelet (Chile). And we have even seen a small number of ‘parity’ or gender-balanced cabinets, for example, during Zapatero’s socialist government in Spain, and more recently in Italy, Sweden and Scotland (Franceschet and Thomas 2011). Finally, it became evident that larger numbers of women in legislatures (high descriptive representation) do not necessarily lead to the kinds of changes desired by some feminists.

Although research in this area is still at a relatively early stage, some of the complexities of the gendering of contemporary executive office and political leadership are emerging. A number of, somewhat contradictory, trends have been noted. In their study of female cabinet ministers in five presidential democracies, Escobar and Taylor Robinson (2014) found that, except for appointments to economic posts, the political capital resources and effectiveness of the women are not significantly different to their male colleagues. There is also some evidence that women leaders’ pathways to office do not differ hugely from men’s (Mueller et al. (2014) found this in their study of prime ministers in Europe). However, although there are increasing numbers of women now being appointed to more non-traditional ‘hard’ ministries such as defence, interior and even foreign affairs or finance, the long-recognized tendency for female cabinet ministers to be appointed to ‘soft’
positions such as education, health and women’s ministries continues (again resonating with women’s perceived roles in the private sphere). And a study of the cabinet careers of ministers in Westminster democracies found that, on average, women ministers started in more lowly positions and were less likely to be promoted to high-status jobs than male ministers (Curtin et al. 2014).

At the same time, analyses of the gender of party leadership (often a stepping-stone to becoming prime minister in parliamentary democracies) show firstly that women are more likely to stand for party leader in low-competition situations – namely, when few men are putting themselves forward (Beckwith 2014) – and furthermore, that women are not only more likely to succeed in becoming party leaders when the political party is doing badly, but they are also more likely than a male leader to be removed if their party doing badly (O’Brien 2014).

Gender scholars have not only looked at women’s ‘presence’ and their descriptive representation but for some time they have also looked at substantive representation and the relationship between the two. Substantive representation is defined as the extent to which representatives advance a group’s policy preferences and interests (Childs and Lovenduski 2013). However, the concept of ‘women’s interests’ has long been a contested one, with many gender scholars disputing the extent to which there can be common interests shared by all women regardless of differences (for example, in terms of class, race and sexuality). As a result, others argue that substantive representation should be understood in terms of ‘voice’ and ‘claims making’ by representatives on behalf of particular groups (thereby raising the issue of who judges the veracity of claims to represent particular groups) (Childs and Lovenduski 2013).

Notwithstanding these conceptual issues, recent analyses of the substantive representation of women within liberal democracies have focused on two main themes. First, studies have looked at the extent to which female representatives, for example in legislatures, ‘act for’ women, measured in terms of advancing or voting for legislation or policy change that is seen to be in women’s interests – whether this is around equality issues, reproductive rights or more traditional welfare concerns (Schwindt Bayer 2010). The empirical evidence is somewhat mixed. It does seem that on the whole women legislators
are more likely to promote and support measures that are identified with ‘women’s interests’ than men, but this varies considerably according to the issue as well as party strength, party discipline and the party’s position on that issue (Swers 2002, 2013). For example, women legislators of different parties are more likely to act together around less contentious issues such as child maintenance payments and domestic violence than more contentious ones like reproductive rights and abortion rights in particular (Franceschet and Piscopo 2008; Waylen 2000). As part of the scepticism about the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation, attention also shifted from notions of a ‘critical mass’ – the number of female representatives (often seen as 30 per cent) needed to make a significant difference – to a focus on ‘critical actors’, that is, examining the roles of key women (and men) who seek to represent women substantively as a group (Childs and Krook 2009).

Second, state bureaucracies and policy-making processes are another important area for feminist scholars thinking about how women’s interests (however defined) might fare within governance structures. Building on long-standing feminist analyses of the state which sees it not as a homogeneous entity but as a complex collection of institutions and contested power relations, state structures are not considered neutral but gendered, and as a result policy outputs may have a differential impact on men and women, often with a detrimental effects on women (Waylen 1998). Some feminist scholars have focused on efforts to create gender equality policies and women’s policy agencies within the state (so-called ‘state feminism’) (Stetson and Mazur 1996). Others have subjected ostensibly gender-neutral policies to gendered analysis. Recently attention has turned to the gendered impact of the austerity policies implemented in many developed economies as a response to the economic crisis beginning in 2007/8.

We can see that, even if these have narrowed over recent decades, gender differences in participation and representation remain in liberal democracies. But one dimension we have yet to explore explicitly as part of our gender audit is the role of political institutions qua institutions in the gendering of democracy. Following an ‘institutionalist turn’ in much of political science, many gender scholars – who share an understanding of institutions as gendered rules, norms and practices (with both formal and informal dimensions) that shape actors’ strategies and preferences – have started looking at political
institutions both in terms of the formal rules and also the informal norms and practices (Krook and Mackay 2011). We have seen that the formal rules of most political systems are now ostensibly gender neutral (with the exception of quotas). There are few political systems that have not extended full suffrage to women and men, and women formally compete as candidates on the same terms. But at the same time we saw that the operation of different electoral rules – for example, in FPTP and PR systems – do contribute to different levels of male and female representation. And, as we will see, formal rule change such as the introduction of quotas and changes to constitutions to enhance rights and equality can have a huge impact if they are well designed, appropriate and enforced. However, this does not undermine the notion that political institutions are gendered nominally and substantively – nominally through gender capture and substantively through numerous mechanisms, like social norms based on accepted ideas about masculinity and femininity that equate masculinity with rationality, power, boundary setting and control and femininity with its opposite: passivity, care, emotion and irrationality – that result in gender bias (Chappell and Waylen 2013).

The gendered nature of the informal institutions – the informal rules, norms and practices – is therefore one dimension of political systems that requires more attention. However, as a number of political scientists have pointed out, informal institutions are often harder to discern than formal ones as their rules and sanctions are not explicit (generally unwritten and communicated through channels that are not official according to Helmke and Levitsky (2004)) and as a result they are often even harder to change. Informal rules, norms and practices can act to prevent women’s political participation and effectiveness. Informal networks (often termed ‘old boy’ networks) can act to exclude women. Elin Bjaarnegard (2013), for example, has identified the importance of ‘homosocial capital’, whereby male-dominated informal networks influence candidate selection processes in political parties in Thailand. Within political institutions, these informal practices can continue to work in gendered ways. The heckling that is commonplace and largely tolerated in the UK Parliament can be extremely gendered, with female MPs forced to endure misogynistic comments (Chappell and Waylen 2013). The persistence of informal norms and rules can sometimes undermine attempts to change or reform existing formal rules or impact on newly created institutions such as the Scottish Parliament or the International
Criminal Court, ensuring that their ‘newness’ remains ‘nested’ in old practices that continue to be ‘remembered’ while the new is ‘forgotten’ (Chappell 2014; Mackay 2014). It is also possible for new informal norms to develop that can undermine a new institution. For example, the French quota system was routinely sabotaged by a new informal norm that it is acceptable for (larger and wealthier) parties to ignore the quota rules and pay the fine (Waylen 2014a).

**GENDERING THE ‘CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY’**

In this section, we explore in more depth how recent changes in participation, representation and legitimacy associated with the ‘crisis of democracy’ are gendered, before considering how male dominance in contemporary democracies could be lessened. Two interlinked trends associated with the crisis of democracy are important to our analysis: first the changes to parties and parties systems; and, second, an increased focus on leadership, the personalization of politics and the changed role of the media. Dahlerup and Leyenaar (2013) argue that these have both positive and negative effects on women’s participation and representation within electoral politics.

Widespread dealignment – with declining levels of party membership and voting – accompanied by declining levels of trust in politicians and interest in politics are symptomatic of the changes in party systems. As mass parties disappear, some rank-and-file organizations such as women’s sections have been abolished, and the ‘new-look’ parties, comprising a small core of professionalized politicians and advisers, remain open to accusations of continuing male domination. But, increasingly, ‘catch-all’ parties, less differentiated by ideology, try to appeal to different groups of voters. As part of this, women voters are often targeted in specific (and more ‘modern’) ways. Policy proposals, such as promises to increase the availability of childcare, are often aimed at women. Throughout the Scottish independence referendum campaign in 2014, for example, the gender gap in support for independence was identified as a key motivation for the childcare pledges of the Scottish National Party.

To broaden their appeal, parties also try to present a less male-dominated image, hoping that women will provide ‘fresh faces’ or make parties appear more modern. For example, in part to counter the perception that it is dominated by a male public school
clique, the UK coalition government of 2010–15 positioned women MPs prominently in the television coverage of parliamentary debates (particularly Prime Minister’s Question Time) and very publicly appointed more women MPs to cabinet posts in the reshuffle of July 2014. Parties also attempt to select and field more women candidates (seen as part of the motivation for Michelle Bachelet’s selection in 2005 as presidential candidate by the increasingly tired ruling Concertación coalition in Chile (Staab and Waylen 2014)).

However, some of the new selection procedures widely touted as part of measures to revitalize politics and counteract falling party memberships can have negative effects on women’s representation. There is some evidence, for example, that selection through primaries can result in fewer women candidates and make it harder to enforce mechanisms aimed at increasing numbers of under-represented group (Hinojosa 2012). Party fragmentation and the rise of ‘anti-politics’ parties, on both the left and the right, can also affect women’s representation in a number of ways. An increasing number of parties can sometimes reduce the number of women elected as more small parties often each have fewer women representatives on the top of their lists (Dahlerup and Leyenaar 2013). Some (but not all) right-wing populist parties, often anti-migrant and xenophobic, also have few women representatives, but parties at the other end of the political spectrum – such as Green parties – often have higher than average numbers of women in senior positions, including as leader.4 Dahlerup and Leyenaar (2013) argue that, on balance, the overall effect of these changes on women’s representation has been positive in the European countries they studied.

Accompanying the decline in political parties and party systems has been an increased emphasis on leadership and a personalization of politics. As such, the personal characteristics of leaders become more important, with a differential effect on women and men. On the one hand women’s performance (such as that of Julia Gillard in Australia) is often judged differently (and often more harshly) than men’s, but at the same time women can be more likely to achieve leadership positions if they are seen as ‘new brooms’ or as part of a revitalization of politics (Beckwith 2014, O’Brien 2014). Now that increased numbers of women have reached leadership positions, more research is needed on whether men and women exercise (or are seen to exercise) leadership in different ways. Franceschet, Piscopo and Thomas (2013), for example, argue that female leaders in Latin America use
four different strategic frames to justify their political careers: the traditional supermadre, the technocratic caretaker, the macho minimizer and the difference denier. And given the new prominence of devices, such as leaders’ debates, in parliamentary as well as presidential elections, it would be useful to know more about their gendered dimensions.

The increased role of the media, and social media in particular, also has a mixed impact on women’s political activity. It is clear that the ways that politicians and leaders are treated by the media continues to be very gendered, and there is some argument that female politicians in particular are increasingly subjected to the kind of scrutiny more often afforded to celebrities. For example, the appearance, dress and behaviour of female politicians are much more widely commented on than their male colleagues’ (O’Brien and Savigny 2014). On 16 July 2014 the Daily Mail, a UK newspaper, used the headline ‘Thigh flashing Esther, and the Battle of the Downing Street Catwalk’ to report the increased number of female politicians appointed to David Cameron’s cabinet in the reshuffle of July 2014, illustrating it with catwalk style pictures of all the new female ministers.

However, new forms of grassroots participation can also be facilitated by social media, allowing campaigns a prominence that would have been hard to achieve otherwise. But conversely social media can also facilitate the harassment and denigration of women campaigners and politicians, as the campaigners (including a female MP) to get a woman on the UK currency found in 2013 when they received misogynistic abuse, including rape threats, via Twitter. Indeed, some commentators have speculated that the (new and old) media treatment of female politicians increasingly acts to discourage women from putting themselves forward for office. The ‘crisis of democracy’ therefore appears to have some contradictory effects, intensifying some existing trends that are resulting in increasing descriptive representation for women, at the same time as subjecting female politicians to greater pressures.

**WHAT MORE NEEDS TO BE DONE TO UNDERMINE MALE DOMINANCE IN POLITICS?**

If there is now additional momentum to reduce male dominance as a result of the ‘crisis of democracy’, it is useful to analyse the strategies on offer to improve: women’s descriptive representation; women’s substantive representation; as well as promoting institutional change.
Strategies to improve women’s descriptive representation can target both the supply and demand for female candidates with varying degrees of effectiveness. Several measures to encourage more women to put themselves forward and to support potential women candidates exist. ‘Soft’ measures range from the provision of funding (such as EMILYs list in the US) to the leadership training courses and mentoring programmes undertaken by political parties, universities, women’s policy agencies and non-governmental organizations. On their own, these will have only a limited effect, as many parties still display a reluctance to select female candidates. It is also necessary to increase the demand for female candidates. New formal rules are one of the most important ways to ensure that women are selected by parties. The best-known and most effective measure to increase the demand for women candidates and levels of women’s representation is gender quotas. These have been very widely adopted all over the world and, if they are well designed, appropriate and enforced (which does not always happen), are a ‘fast track’ way to increase in women’s representation (Dahlerup 2006, Krook 2009, Franceschet et al. 2012). Indeed, more than 50% of electoral polities now have a form of quota, whether in the form of electoral quotas, party quotas or reserved seats (Dahleup and Norris 2014).

Despite their potential and proven efficacy, quotas have been controversial, with critics arguing that they undermine merit. But there is no evidence that ‘quota women’ are different from other women politicians. Allen, Cutts and Campbell’s (2014) analysis of Labour women elected from all-women shortlists in 1997 shows that ‘quota women’ are as well qualified as their non-quota colleagues and are treated the same both by voters and by the gatekeepers of executive office. It is also argued that gender quotas can improve the quality of male politicians. Besley et al. (2013) examined the data on candidates in Swedish municipalities over seven elections and claim that the ‘zipper quota’ implemented by the Social Democratic Party actually increased the competence of male politicians. However, as Franceschet and Piscopo (2008) argue, using the case of Argentina, quotas may increase the number of women, but they do not necessarily disturb the underlying male hierarchies or exclusionary male networks.

A number of measures have also been implemented to improve the substantive representation of women and ensure ‘gender-friendly’ policy-making. Among the best-known formal mechanisms are state women’s machineries/women’s policy agencies. These
have had mixed success, depending on their location within the state, their levels of funding, support from government, technical expertise and capacity to initiate or deliver policy – many have been peripheral, underfunded and powerless in the face of resistance both inside and outside the state (Waylen 2000). Partly as a response to the critique that gender concerns are marginalized within these separate, often ineffectual bodies, gender has been ‘mainstreamed’ within national and international organizations, trying to ensure that the gendered implications of policy is considered at every stage, from design to implementation (Waylen 2008). Again, the verdict on the effectiveness of gender mainstreaming is mixed. Some believe that it can make a difference (and even be transformatory), but others argue that it is a technocratic tool with limited possibilities for profound change.

The preceding discussion makes clear that achieving gender-equitable democracy and undermining the male dominance of political systems requires more than an increase in the numbers of women and mechanisms like gender mainstreaming in policy-making. Indeed, presence is sometimes over-emphasized – it may be necessary but it is also limited in what it can achieve (Waylen 2014b). More profound institutional change is necessary to enable critical actors to be more effective and challenge male dominance. Institutional change can take various forms – either via the creation of new institutions (for example as a result of a transition to democracy or the design of a new constitution) or more commonly via the reform or redesign of existing institutions such as legislatures and parties. But it is also clear from the preceding analysis that changing formal institutions is often not enough. Informal institutions also need to be modified as pre-existing informal institutions can undermine efforts to create more gender-equitable outcomes or the absence of ‘completing’ informal institutions makes the success of formal rule change less likely. However, changing informal institutions – such as the often widely accepted gendered norms and practices that contribute to a sense of politics as a masculine business and undermine women’s effectiveness, making it harder for women to progress through politics and for certain gender measures to become law – presents a big challenge as we saw from our discussion of ‘nested newness’. But changing both the formal and informal institutions, creating more open and transparent political systems in place of closed and male dominated ones make it more likely that women will come forward.
CONCLUSIONS

Contemporary democracies remain male dominated, despite changes over the last couple of decades that have brought a significant increase in the numbers of women in positions of power. But although politics in contemporary democracies is no longer ‘business as usual’, it certainly has not been transformed. We have also seen that the ‘crisis of democracy’, often seen as a crisis of representation, participation and legitimacy, has had a somewhat contradictory impact in gender terms. On the one hand, it has increased the opportunities as well as intensified the pressure for an increase in the numbers of women in electoral politics. Measures to raise the levels of women’s descriptive representation now have widespread acceptability and there is a greater sense of urgency surrounding their implementation in many contexts. Increasing the representation of women also offers some potential to revitalize democratic politics. There is evidence, for example, that the presence of women leaders increases women’s levels of political activity and voting (Alexander and Jalalzai 2014, Reyes-Householder and Schwindt-Bayer 2014).

In this sense, the ‘crisis of democracy’ has itself contributed to the reduction in the male dominance of politics. And one of its perceived solutions – raising the numbers of women – could help to ameliorate some of the widely perceived symptoms of the crisis, such as declining levels of participation and a sense of the increasing aloofness of politicians from ‘ordinary people’. However, it is necessary to ensure the greater participation and representation of, not just some women, but all currently under-represented groups and minorities. This is fundamental to ensuring a secure future for liberal democracy. Replacing white, privately and Oxbridge educated male MPs and cabinet ministers with white, privately and Oxbridge educated female MPs in the UK Houses of Parliament is not necessarily a significant improvement.

At the same time the ‘crisis of democracy’ has intensified some trends that make politics a difficult place for many women and can also lead to policy outcomes that are not necessarily gender friendly. As we have seen, the increased presence of women in the political sphere does not necessarily lead to increased substantive representation. Women legislators do not necessarily support progressive gender agendas, for example around equality and reproductive rights. And measures to increase women’s substantive
representation, such as gender mainstreaming, have had mixed effectiveness. Many measures have also been subject to increased contestation, retrenchment and backlash in recent years. And while new forms of participation, such as citizens’ juries, can afford new opportunities for exercising voice, facilitated by social media like Twitter, the new (and old) media can also provide new forms of accentuating gender difference with negative repercussions for many women.

To improve the quality of democracy - enhancing the participation of and representation of all groups, and reversing the decline in the legitimacy of political institutions - more profound institutional change than simply increasing the participation of (some) women in politics is required. This alone cannot provide a solution to the ‘crisis of democracy’ or end male dominance in politics. We need change both the formal as well as the informal rules, norms and practices that shape political institutions to help to enable everyone to participate fully in high quality democracies regardless of their social position.

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NOTES

1 For example, even countries such as Sweden – long seen as a beacon for high levels of women’s representation – are also perceived as experiencing a ‘crisis of democracy’.
2 A similar phenomenon has long been noted in less institutionalized democracies in the context of political crisis (as well as some transitions to democracy).
3 The definitions of democracy operationalized in much of the political science literature are also gendered in significant ways. For example, although the conceptual definitions generally stress the importance of the representation of all adults, which clearly includes women, as Pamela Paxton (2000) demonstrates, when some mid-range scholars operationalize their definitions of democracy, the enfranchisement of women somehow
disappears from view. As a result, some polities that formally excluded women have been defined as democratic.

4 Although there is some concern that radical anti-austerity parties like Syriza in Greece (and also Podemos in Spain) have few women in top leadership positions. The Syriza government appointed in January 2015 contained no women in ministerial positions and only six in subministerial and alternate positions.

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