

The symbolic impact of women's representation on citizens' political attitudes: Measuring the effect through survey experiments

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Abstract

Women's political presence is expected to impact on citizens' political attitudes by symbolizing that women are just as capable to govern as men, which provides a role-model effect to female citizens and signals the inclusiveness of the political system to all social groups. Research on whether women's representation enhances the legitimacy of, closeness to and satisfaction with political institutions, as well as levels of political engagement is still in its infancy, not least because of several empirical and methodological challenges, including issues of spuriousness, reversed causation and endogeneity. We use an experimental online survey specifically designed to examine whether exposure to distinct scenarios about greater women's representation and its concomitant effects have an impact on citizens' political attitudes. Our results show that respondents' evaluation of the political system is positively influenced by the use of framing on greater women's representation whereas their political engagement remains rather unaffected. Symbolic effects are found for both men and especially for women respondents. The results hold for the two countries where the experiment was administered, Spain and Portugal, which provides our study with an increased external validity.

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1. Introduction

Besides arguments of justice, the normative case for women's descriptive (numerical) representation has been made in terms of its effects on substantive and symbolic representation. Regarding the substantive dimension, greater women's presence in politics is expected to influence the type of legislation produced by generating more attention to women's interests and needs. As for symbolic representation, women's political presence is considered to instill a role-model effect that stirs female citizens' political engagement. Also, by signaling the inclusiveness of political institutions, the legitimacy of the political system is likely to increase for all social groups (Phillips, 1995; Mansbridge, 1999). In brief, 'engendering' political institutions is expected to 'engender' politics at the mass level (cf. Barnes and Burchard, 2013: 785).

Research on whether women's political presence enhances citizens' political attitudes on the legitimacy of, closeness to and satisfaction with institutions, as well as levels of political engagement is still in its infancy, not least because of several empirical and methodological challenges (see Espírito-Santo, 2011: 8). These include a dearth of adequate data as well as difficulties in establishing the causal effects, including issues of spuriousness, reversed causation and endogeneity (Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005; Wolbrecht and Campbell, 2007; Stockemer and Byrne, 2012). This has led scholars to reach at best mixed results, to identify merely modest causal relationships or, alternatively, to not find any trace of them.

This paper seeks to contribute to alleviating these challenges by using an experimental online survey designed to facilitate the testing of effects of women's increased political presence on citizens' attitudes. More specifically, we examine whether exposure to distinct scenarios about greater women's representation and its concomitant effects has an impact on citizens' political engagement and on their evaluation of the political system. The survey was administered in Spain and Portugal, two countries with similar socioeconomic and cultural characteristics wherein party quotas have been in use since the late 1980s and legislative quotas since the mid 2000s (Verge and Espírito-Santo, 2014).

The following section critically examines the theoretical and empirical challenges when it comes to measuring the effects of women's political presence on citizens' political attitudes. The next section presents the experimental design of our study and discusses our theoretical expectations. Subsequently we present the results of the empirical analysis and, lastly, we discuss the main findings and conclude.

2. The challenge of measuring of symbolic representation

Based on Pitkin (1967), gender politics scholars have defined symbolic representation as the extent to which gendered embodied actors – i.e. women in public office – affect “the represented’s feelings of being fairly and effectively represented” (Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler, 2005: 407). In this vein, women politicians may “stand as symbols for other women” (Burrell, 1996: 151). As noted by Burrell (1996: 151), “women in public office stand as symbols for other women, both enhancing their identification with the system and their ability to have influence within it”.

While a positive relationship has been found between the presence of female politicians and women’s levels of political discussion and political ambition, other indicators of political engagement, such as increases in women’s interest in electoral campaigns, internal political efficacy or convincing others to vote for a specific party, show mixed results. Some studies have confirmed the existence of a positive relationship (Sapiro and Conover, 1997; Burns et al. 2001; Campbell and Wolbrecht, 2006; Wolbrecht and Campbell, 2007; Norris and Krook, 2009; Desposato and Norrander, 2009; Reingold and Harrell, 2010; Verge and Tormos, 2012; Barnes and Burchard, 2013) while others have discovered a very weak link or no relationship at all (Koch, 1997; Atkeson, 2003; Lawless, 2004; Dolan, 2006; Karp and Banducci, 2008; Zetterberg, 2009, 2012; Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer, 2010; Clayton, 2015). In the few studies examining symbolic effects on the evaluation of the system mixed findings also prevail, with positive impacts found for satisfaction with democracy (Karp and Banducci, 2008), confidence in the lower house (Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler, 2005) and external political efficacy (Atkeson and Carrillo, 2007), and no effects traced for either trust in government (Lawless, 2004) or in politicians (Zetterberg, 2009).

Some of these studies have covered not only effects on the underrepresented group (women) but also on the overrepresented group (men). With a few exceptions (Hansen, 1997), these works show a positive impact as well on men. However, this result is often presented as ‘anomalous’ (Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler, 2005: 425), ‘counterintuitive’ (Lawless, 2004: 94) or ‘intriguing’ (Atkeson and Carrillo, 2007: 95) without providing any further explanation (see also Reingold and Harrell 2010; Lawless, 2004; Karp and Banducci, 2008; Verge and Tormos, 2012).

The lack of conclusive evidence for the different indicators can be largely attributed to the fact that analyses of symbolic representation are fraught with both empirical and methodological challenges. Firstly, to adequately establish the causal

effects of women's numerical presence on citizens' political attitudes, a clear cut-off time period is required to segment the analysis into one in which political representation was strongly skewed towards men (t) and another one in which proportions become more equilibrated ($t+1$). This is of paramount importance since symbolic effects have been found to be nonlinear, that is, they accelerate as the percentage of women in the legislature increases (Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler, 2005: 424; Gilardi, 2015). In advanced industrial democracies, where women's representation has mainly followed an 'incremental track', no clear cut-off point exists. And where statutory gender quotas have been adopted, more commonly gradual increases or stagnation rather than dramatic jumps are observed (Dahlerup and Freidenvall, 2005). Yet, even when two clear periods exist we risk attributing changes in citizens' attitudes and behavior to increases in women's representation at the expense of competing explanations derived from broader nationwide attitudinal, cultural or behavioral shifts (Clayton, 2015: 343). Spuriousness is thus a strong concern since some unobserved factors might facilitate both greater women's representation and female citizens' more active political involvement (Wolbrecht and Campbell, 2007: 927).

Secondly, it is theoretically and empirically plausible that reversed causation exists between women's representation and the particular symbolic effect(s) under examination (Stockemer and Byrne, 2012). For example, countries in which the gender gap in political engagement, such as in political interest, is lower are also more likely to have a higher presence of women in politics, and vice versa. Similarly, changes in the percentage of women in parliaments and changes in female citizens' beliefs in their ability to govern may be part of a virtuous cycle where both variables integrate "a reciprocal system of mutually reinforcing empowerments for women" (Alexander, 2012: 446). As noted by York and Bell (2014: 58), political representation is "positively correlated with other indicators of women's status". Thirdly, a more general problem with the data lies in the fact that public opinion surveys do not usually include any or enough questions to linking the presence of women in politics with issues of symbolic representation (Lawless, 2004: 94). Alternatively, surveys drafted anew in gender-balanced or less skewed settings lack a comparative benchmark. Lastly, the assumption upon which most scholarship is built, namely that most citizens are aware of the gender composition of political institutions must also be problematized.

Quasi-natural experiments avoid all the problems discussed above. Yet, such situations, as for instance the random variation in exposure to female leaders following

gender quota adoption across village councils, are rare events and hard to come by (see, for India, Bhavnani, 2009; Beaman et al., 2010; and, for Lesotho, Clayton, 2015). Specifically designed experiments, therefore, may offer the possibility to circumvent some of the problems identified. While the use of experiments in political science has dramatically increased during the past few years (see Gaines et al., 2007), examples of experimental designs are few and far between in the field of women's representation. If implemented, studies tend to focus on gendered stereotypes about female politicians (see, among others, Sapiro, 1981/1982; Matland, 1994; Streb et al., 2008; Schneider and Bos, 2014). To the best of our knowledge, symbolic effects on citizens' political attitudes are yet to be tested with experimental methods. In the next section we present the design of our framing experiment embedded in an online survey with Spanish and Portuguese citizens.

3. Examining symbolic effects through a framing experiment

The symbolic effects of women's representation on citizens' attitudinal, cultural or behavioral shifts may largely depend on how citizens observe and react to elected women (Franceschet et al. 2012: 239-42). The observation of the gender composition of institutions is mediated either by the mass media, political parties or political campaigns. A large body of scholarship has shown that framing effects are ubiquitous and that they can also be reproduced by researchers in questions, vignettes or artificial news stories to influence citizens' attitudes (see Zaller 1992; Jacoby, 2000; Druckman, 2001). In this paper we use a framing experiment through which we examine whether citizens' political engagement and their evaluation of the political system is affected by exposure to distinct scenarios about greater women's representation and the concomitant effects their presence brings about. While large effects of women's numerical increases in politics on citizens' attitudes cannot be expected since these are mediated by other aspects of the political, institutional, and cultural environment, we seek to test whether citizens' attitudes are affected when some purportedly relevant information is provided in different ways.

We implement this framing experiment in an original public opinion survey in Spain and Portugal. The identical surveys were administered to 1,368 Spanish and 1,361 Portuguese respondents in May 2015. The samples were selected from a commercial – by invitation only – on-line pool of respondents (ISO 26362 certified) and comprised adult respondents aged 18-65. The online administration of the survey helps

us to avoid social desirability problems, an issue of high concern when examining gender issues (Streb et al., 2008). The samples were stratified using sex, age, education and size of habitat quotas. This provides adequate variety in key demographics to minimize the results being driven by heterogeneous effects of the stimuli on different population groups. Each treatment group had a comparable social composition. The aggregate analysis of the two surveys provides us with about 300 respondents per treatment group (see Appendix).

As shown in Table 1, vignettes were paired into three main clusters or scenarios. Each respondent was randomly assigned to either a treatment condition or the control group (no treatment). Given that the credibility of the frame's source is highly relevant (Druckman, 2001: 1042), the vignettes were presented on the screen in a way that simulated the appearance of an excerpt of a newspaper editorial that allegedly relied on parliamentary sources to reflect on the increase in women's representation and the effects (or the lack of effects) observed in national politics. Since the experiment used deception, upon completion of the survey respondents were debriefed about the experimental character of this 'fake' editorial. While all scenarios described the increasing presence of female politicians, each of them emphasized a subset of theoretically founded considerations surrounding women's presence.

Within each cluster of scenarios, one subgroup received a positive treatment and the other one received an equivalent negative treatment. The different stimuli aimed at tackling various potential causal mechanisms, namely: (i) the renewal of politics (A1 & A2); (ii) female politicians' competency (B1 & B2) and female politicians' competency in association to electoral quotas (B1quotas & B2quotas); and promotion of women's interests (C1 & C2). Therefore, the first two sets of scenarios build on the descriptive-symbolic representation link while the third one connects substantive with symbolic representation. Like in the case of quotas, the effects of women's representation on one dimension of political representation may actually be the result of how it affects another dimension (cf. Franceschet et al., 2012: 239).

In this paper, we adopt a broad definition of symbolic representation that includes the various kinds of relationships that take place between citizens and the political system, namely their political engagement and their evaluation of the political system (Espírito-Santo, 2011: 3). In what follows we draw different hypotheses on whether and how framing women's representation in certain ways may affect citizens' political attitudes.

Table 1. Experimental design and vignettes

(Common introduction for all treatment groups) Reflecting on political events in the past decade, a widely read national newspaper recently highlighted the following in its editorial:	
(A1) More women, new politics Women's presence in politics has largely increased in Spain (Portugal) in the past decade. <i>At least, barriers to women's political access have been eliminated.</i> Women are found in all political posts, be them deputies, ministers or mayors. The number of women as heads of candidate lists has also increased among all political parties. <i>It is worth noting that nowadays politics has a significant number of women role models and, as pointed by parliamentary sources, the way of doing politics has been renewed.</i>	(A2) More women, same politics Although women's presence in politics has largely increased in Spain (Portugal) in the past decade, <i>access to politics is still much more difficult for women.</i> There are still fewer women than men in political posts, be them deputies, ministers or mayors. Likewise, most candidate lists are headed by men among all political parties. <i>It is worth noting that most role models in politics continue to be men and, as pointed by parliamentary sources, the way of doing politics has not changed.</i>
(B1) More women and more prepared Women's presence in politics has largely increased in Spain (Portugal) in the past decade. Women are found in all political posts, be them deputies, ministers or mayors. The number of women as heads of candidate lists has also increased among all political parties. <i>It is worth noting that, as pointed by parliamentary sources, women politicians are equally or more prepared than their male peers and have the same level of initiative, competence and engagement.</i>	(B2) More women but less prepared Women's presence in politics has largely increased in Spain (Portugal) in the past decade. Women are found in all political posts, be them deputies, ministers or mayors. The number of women as heads of candidate lists has also increased among all political parties. <i>However, as pointed by parliamentary sources, it is worth noting that women politicians are often less prepared than their male peers and have lower levels of initiative, competence and engagement.</i>
(B1quotas) Quotas: More women and more prepared Women's presence in politics has largely increased in Spain (Portugal) in the past decade thanks to electoral quotas. Women are found in all political posts, be them deputies, ministers or mayors. The number of women as heads of candidate lists has also increased among all political parties. <i>It is also worth noting that, as pointed by parliamentary sources, women politicians are equally or more prepared than their male peers and have the same level of initiative, competence and engagement.</i>	(B2quotas) Quotas: More women but less prepared Women's presence in politics has largely increased in Spain (Portugal) in the past decade thanks to electoral quotas. Women are found in all political posts, be them deputies, ministers or mayors. The number of women as heads of candidate lists has also increased among all political parties. <i>However, as pointed by parliamentary sources, it is worth noting that women politicians are often less prepared than their male peers and have lower levels of initiative, competence and engagement.</i>
(C1) More women, more responsiveness Women's presence in politics has largely increased in Spain (Portugal) in the past decade. Women are found in all political posts, be them deputies, ministers or mayors. The number of women as heads of candidate lists has also increased among all political parties. <i>As pointed by parliamentary sources, politicians have now different profiles and personal experiences and it is worth noting that women's increased presence has contributed to making legislation and policy more responsive to women's interests and needs.</i>	(C2) More women, same responsiveness Women's presence in politics has largely increased in Spain (Portugal) in the past decade. Women are found in all political posts, be them deputies, ministers or mayors. The number of women as heads of candidate lists has also increased among all political parties. <i>However, as pointed by parliamentary sources, politicians' profiles and personal experiences are rather similar. Thus, it is worth noting that women's increased presence has not contributed to making legislation and policy more responsive to women's interests and needs.</i>

Note: Italics only used here to highlight what makes each vignette distinct from the others.

As emphasized by Mansbridge (1999: 648-49), being part of a traditionally excluded group implies carrying “the historically embedded meaning ‘Persons with these characteristics do not rule’, with the possible implication, ‘Persons with these

characteristics are not able to (fit to) rule” (see also Phillips, 1995: 39; Burrell, 1996: 151). As members of an underrepresented group, women may internalize the idea that politics is a ‘man’s game’ thereby developing a much weaker interest in politics and feeling less politically efficacious. Conversely, the presence of female politicians may stir women’s political engagement through a ‘role model’ effect (Karp and Banducci, 2008). Since this impact supposes an identification based on descriptive characteristics between those represented and representatives, effects on political involvement are much more likely to apply to women. Indeed, women have been found to be more sensitive to issues of underrepresentation (Dolan and Sanbonmatsu, 2009: 412).

Yet, men’s political engagement might also be enhanced if women’s increased presence is perceived as a sign that the political system has been renewed as regards either openness or responsiveness to citizens’ interests and inputs (Atkeson and Carrillo, 2007: 81; High-Pippert and Comer, 1998: 62). A gender-balanced political system may therefore be perceived as fairer and be evaluated more positively. In addition, as suggested for the case of electoral campaigns, the simple fact that new groups access political office or compete for visible offices may increase citizens’ interest in politics (Burns, Schlozman et al., 2001: 349-50; see also Campbell and Wollbrecht, 2006). Hence, our first set of hypotheses posits the following:

H1.1: *When female and male citizens believe that there are no barriers to political access and that the political system has been renewed, they are expected to feel more politically engaged.*

H1.2: *When female and male citizens believe that there are no barriers to political access and that the political system has been renewed, they are expected to evaluate the political system more positively.*

The symbolic effects on citizens’ political attitudes may not only be determined by perceptions of the type of impacts women’s numerical increases produce in the ways politics and institutions work but also by evaluations of the very same women elected. Given that the use of gender schemas is not abandoned when women make significant inroads into politics (see, among others, Matland, 1994: 281), citizens’ beliefs may thus be affected by whether women are seen as undeserving tokens or meritocratic nominees (Franceschet et al., 2012: 239). On the one hand, the saliency of women’s qualities as political leaders might contribute to decreasing the feelings of inadequacy that are likely

to be felt by female citizens as a consequence of women's underrepresentation. If female citizens are made to believe that women are as able to perform effectively in politics as men, that might lead the former to increase their political engagement (Phillips, 1995; Burrell, 1996; Mansbridge, 1999). On the other hand, positive presentations of women politicians' capacity may increase women's legitimacy as political actors thereby leading to higher confidence levels in institutions (Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005).

However, if women's increases are attributed to quotas the virtues of a gender-balanced composition of parliaments might be undermined, with women's presence being regarded as unnaturally forced and as posing problems of lack of preparedness of the so-called 'quota-women'. Indeed, while legal quotas have been adopted worldwide, including Portugal and Spain, they are still a contested measure among some political parties and citizens. As a result, having gained access to office through a positive action measure might cancel out the expected symbolic effects of women's increased representation (Clayton, 2015: 356). Therefore, we posit a second set of hypothesis:

H2.1: When women citizens believe women politicians are as competent and engaged in their political position as their male peers, they are expected to feel more politically involved.

H2.2: When male and female citizens believe women politicians are as competent and engaged in their political position as their male peers, they are expected to evaluate the political system more positively.

H2.3: The symbolic effects produced by seeing women as competent and engaged politicians, as stipulated in H2.1 and H2.2, are likely to decrease when women's numerical gains are associated to gender quotas.

The evaluation of women politicians may also be affected by whether voters link legislators' descriptive attributes to prospects for substantive representation, that is, for how women politicians are expected to 'act for' women citizens by engendering the debates and legislation. Increases in the number of women politicians may provide a voice for previously overlooked interests (Phillips, 1995; Mansbridge, 1999). A greater presence of women contesting or occupying public office might thus suggest female citizens that political institutions will produce more women-friendly policies (Burns et

al., 2001: 352) thereby positively influencing their satisfaction with the political system. For one thing, one of the main arguments female citizens use to justify an increased presence of women politicians is the belief that it is indispensable to guaranteeing that women's interests are represented (Espírito-Santo, 2015: 9). Likewise, citizens consider women politicians to bring different areas of competence to politics, particularly those associated to traditional female policy domains (Matland, 1994: 288). Accordingly, our last hypothesis posits that:

H3: When female citizens believe that women's numerical representation advances women's interests, they are expected to evaluate the political system more positively.

In testing the impact of the different scenarios of our framing experiment on respondents' political attitudes we use a number of dependent variables. To capture political engagement we focus on interest in politics and internal political efficacy. To measure whether women's representation stimulates a more positive evaluation of the system we concentrate on satisfaction with democracy, political inclusiveness and system responsiveness.¹ Respondents answered the corresponding questions in the survey immediately after having been exposed to the vignettes so that the treatment would be fresh and no interference occurred.

4. Empirical results

Our empirical analysis proceeds into two steps. Firstly, we perform t-tests for each type of scenario, where the means for positive and negative considerations are shown for all respondents receiving a treatment (scenarios) as well as for female and male subgroups. Yet, as Gaines et al. (2007) point out, it is possible to find differences among treatment groups, while neither of them differs significantly from the control group. Since we can therefore only "tell a more complete story" (Gaines et al., 2007: 9) by including the control group into the comparison, secondly, we estimate full models to assess whether the positive or the negative (or both) frames shape attitudes. The models estimating coefficients of the frames of greater women's representation on each dependent variable include attitudinal and demographic control variables.

Citizens' levels of political sophistication might well influence whether they pay attention to and how they process the symbolic effects derived from women's

¹ A more detailed overview, including the wording of the questions can be found in the Appendix.

representation. The impact of political sophistication is also a common finding in framing studies (Sniderman and Bullock, 2004). We therefore include an additive index of consumption of political news through television, radio and press – built upon three separate variables. Similarly, because ideology shapes citizens’ acceptance of women politicians (Paxton and Kunovitch, 2003: 103) and has also been found to moderate the role model effect (Matland, 1994: 283), respondents’ ideological self-placement (ranging from 1 ‘left’ to ‘10’ right) is factored in the multivariate model. Regarding citizens’ predisposition in terms of gender equality beliefs, we include the position on the statement ‘both men and women should undertake domestic tasks’ along with the widely used question on political gender bias, that is, the position on the statement ‘men make better political leaders than women do’.

Lastly, and contrary to most scholarship, we directly tackle the problematic assumption of citizens’ knowledge about the gender composition of political institutions. To be able to do so, before reading the vignettes, respondents were asked to state their idea of the proportion of women deputies in the respective national lower house. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union world ranking on women in parliaments, on May 1st, 2015, Spain had 41.1% women deputies and Portugal had 31.3% women deputies (IPU, 2015).² Yet, respondents reported an average proportion of 31% in Spain and 24% in Portugal, far below the actual level. While 51% of Spanish respondents and 63% of Portuguese respondents believe that women’s representation is below 30%, in both countries about 6% of respondents believe it to be larger than 50%.³ The model then includes the deviation between respondents’ reported proportion of women deputies in their national parliament and the real proportion – as to 1st May 2015, IPU data.

The questions on which our control variables rely were posed to respondents before they were confronted with the vignettes. To prevent that participants would identify the survey with gender issues, gender-related items were presented in blocks together with other gender-neutral political or social items. In addition, in order to

² The difference stems from the dissimilar proportions established for either sex by legislative quotas (at least 40% in Spain vs. at least 33% in Portugal) and from the higher institutionalization of party quotas in Spain, which has led to a more effective implementation of parity (Verge and Espírito-Santo, 2014). After the respective 2011 elections, women deputies mounted to 35.4% in Spain and 26.5% in Portugal. Given that more men than women deputies are appointed to executive office but more women than men are placed in unwinnable positions in party lists, mid-term replacements augment women’s presence – vacant seats are fielded with non elected candidate on party lists (in strict order of appearance in the ticket).

³ Thus, ‘reminding’ through the subsequent vignettes that women’s presence in politics has largely increased in their country in the past decade allows leveraging respondents’ previous perception and thus decreasing to some extent the observed standard deviation (17.27 in Spain and 15.69 in Portugal).

distract respondents from previous questions and thus to avoid any spillover effect (Gaines et al. 2007), between the attitudinal questions and the exposure to the vignette respondents had to complete two tasks of unscrambling sentences that did not contain any gender-related concepts.⁴ For the demographic variables, in addition to gender, the model includes age (numerical variable) and educational level (a dummy variable for tertiary education).

To what extent did our framing experiment alter the importance of women’s representation for citizens’ political attitudes? Table 2 reports the results for the two dependent variables capturing political engagement. Starting with our scenario of ‘renewal of politics’, receiving a positive framing (scenario A1) – no more barriers for women’s political access and presenting politics being renewed – vis-à-vis a negative one – existence of barriers to women’s election and no renewal of politics – produces the expected results, that is, respondents’ interest in politics and political efficacy increase and it does so for both genders. However, attitudinal differences are very small and not statistically significant in any of these indicators for either men or women. As Figure 1 presenting the marginal effects for our full models shows, neither A1 (positive scenario) nor A2 (negative scenario) are significantly different from the control group for any of the indicators of political engagement. Therefore, H1.1 is refuted.

Table 2. Comparison of symbolic effects on political engagement

		Interest in politics			Political efficacy		
		All	Women	Men	All	Women	Men
Renewal of politics	A1	2,59	2,52	2,65	2,87	2,74	3,00
	A2	2,48	2,38	2,57	2,82	2,71	2,93
Female politicians’ competency	B1	2,61	2,49	2,73	2,86	2,77	2,95
	B2	2,50	2,43	2,59	2,88	2,86	2,90
	B1quotas	2,58	2,40	2,76 ⁺	2,79	2,68	2,90
	B2quotas	2,47	2,36	2,58	2,86	2,73	2,99

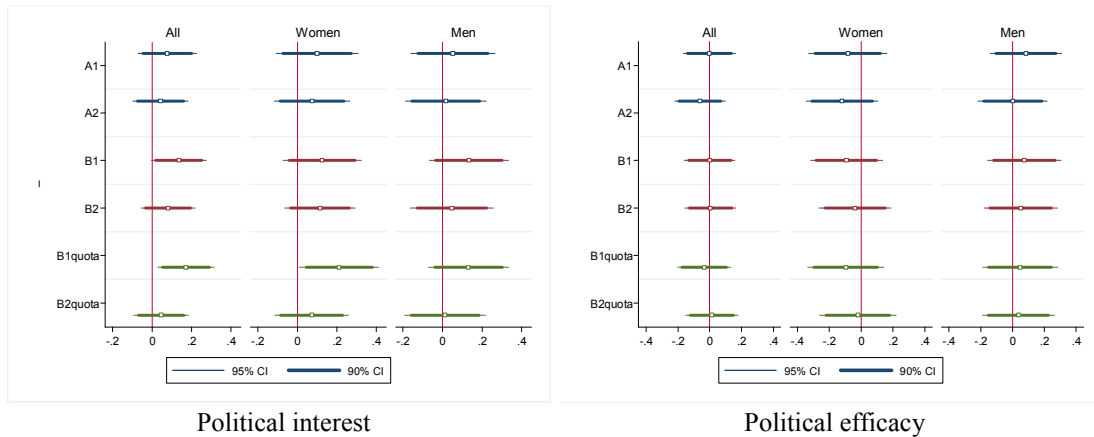
T-test (2-tailed): ⁺ p < .1; * p < .05; ** p < .01. Range 1 to 4, with 4 being the most positive category.

Some caveats are in order here. It should be noted that symbolic effects on political engagement are usually examined in the context of electoral campaigns (Atkeson, 2003; Campbell and Wolbrecht, 2006; Lawless, 2004; Dolan, 2006; Reingold and Harrell, 2010; Burns et al., 2001: 350; Koch, 1997). Furthermore, as opposed to evaluations about candidates or other short-term political issues, interest in politics and political efficacy cannot be modified by respondents ‘on the fly’ since they are affected by socialization processes, access to resources and situational factors. However, we

⁴ These tasks were presented to participants as a way of testing reading and writing skills.

cannot disregard indirect symbolic effects on political engagement attitudes. For example, those who believe that system inclusiveness and responsiveness are higher are more likely to be politically active (Atkeson and Carrillo, 2007: 96).

Figure 1. Marginal effects for political engagement per treatment group



The impact of a ‘renewal of politics’ frame on the evaluation of the political system, however, is positive, as posited in H1.2. As Table 3 shows, the three indicators considered present significantly higher means of satisfaction with the political system in scenario A1 (positive) than scenario A2 (negative). The symbolic effect is observed among men and women on political inclusiveness (at 99% level) and system responsiveness (at 99% level for women and 90% level for men), whereas only women are positively affected on their satisfaction with democracy (at 95% level).

Table 3. Comparison of symbolic effects on evaluation of the political system

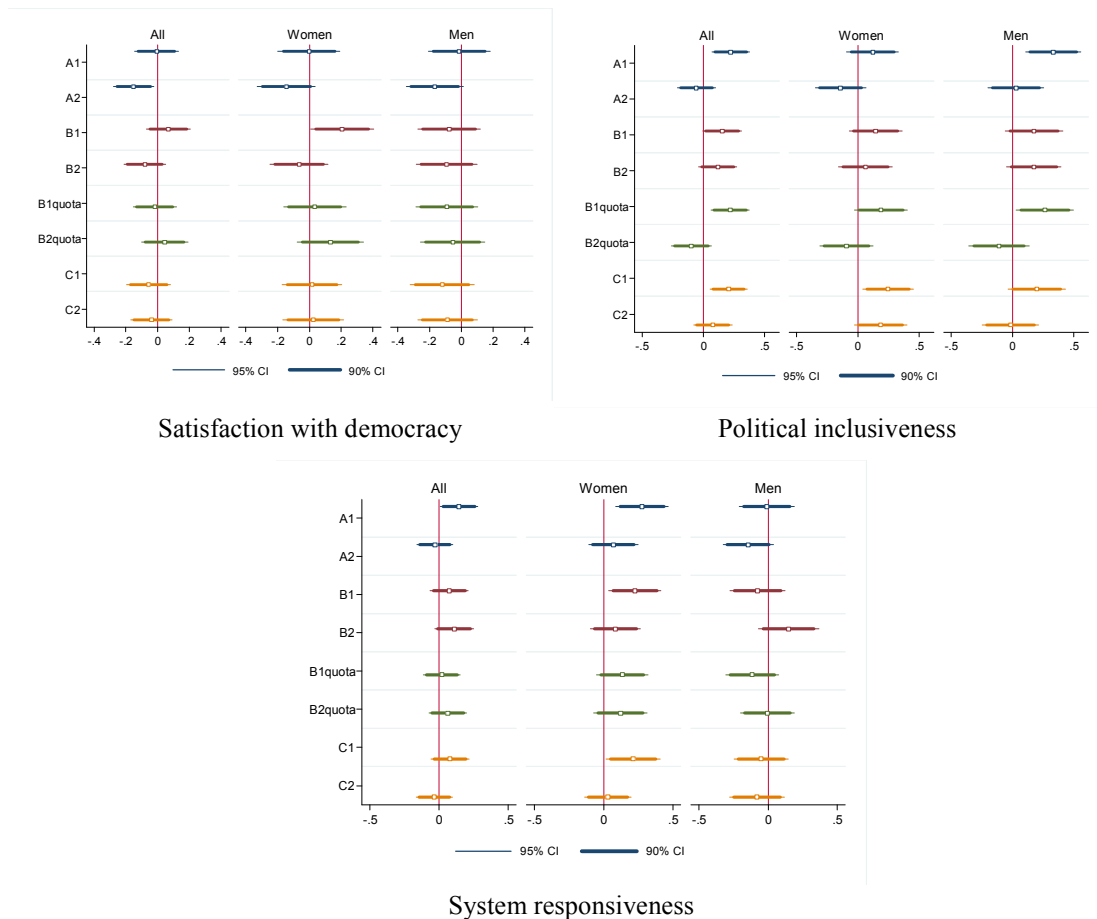
		<i>Satisfaction with democracy</i>			<i>Political inclusiveness</i>			<i>System responsiveness</i>		
		<i>All</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>
<i>Renewal of politics</i>	<i>A1</i>	1.81**	1.75*	1.87	2.75**	2.64**	2.86**	1.81**	1.82**	1.80⁺
	<i>A2</i>	1.64	1.55	1.73	2.44	2.32	2.55	1.61	1.59	1.64
<i>Female politicians' competency</i>	<i>B1</i>	1.86*	1.87*	1.84	2.69	2.63	2.74	1.78	1.78*	1.79
	<i>B2</i>	1.71	1.67	1.76	2.66	2.61	2.72	1.72	1.57	1.90
	<i>B1quotas</i>	1.79	1.70	1.88	2.74**	2.67*	2.81**	1.68	1.62	1.75
	<i>B2quotas</i>	1.86	1.84	1.88	2.48	2.45	2.51	1.75	1.66	1.85
<i>Promotion of women's int.</i>	<i>C1</i>	1.74	1.70	1.77	2.75*	2.77	2.74⁺	1.73	1.75*	1.74
	<i>C2</i>	1.77	1.72	1.83	2.59	2.64	2.54	1.67	1.55	1.79

T-test (2-tailed): ⁺ p < .1; * p < .05; ** p < .01. Range 1 to 4, with 4 being the most positive category.

Comparing both treatment groups to the control group corroborates the existence of this effect. As Figure 2 shows, having been exposed to a negative framing of women’s representation (scenario A2) produces significantly lower levels of satisfaction with democracy (at 99% level) than having received no treatment (control group). Yet,

in contrast to the results shown by the t-test, it is mainly men who see their political attitude changed when faced with a negative treatment condition (at 90% level). The remaining two indicators, that is, political inclusiveness and system responsiveness, also confirm the symbolic effects. A positive framing of women’s presence in political power impacts on the way citizens evaluate female citizens’ exclusion from politics, especially among men (at 99% level). A positive perception of the renewal of politics also affects the extent to which the interests of all social groups are considered to be reflected on the legislation and policies adopted, in this case the symbolic effects concentrate on women (at 99% level). Overall, the results allow us to confirm H1.2.

Figure 2. Marginal effects for evaluation of the system per treatment group



Our second set of hypotheses expected to find symbolic effects on female citizens’ political engagement and citizens’ evaluation of the political system when women politicians are seen as being as competent and engaged as men politicians (scenario B1). If we look at the t-test in Table 2, the comparisons of means show no significant effect for none of the two variables of interest for any of the subgroups. Yet, when compared against the control group including further attitudinal and demographic

variables, the marginal effects plotted in Figure 1 indicate that a positive framing of women politicians' competency slightly increases citizens' political interest (at 90% level), although the results only hold when women and men respondents are clustered together. Thus, we can only partially accept H2.1. Adjusting the positive scenario with the mentioning of quotas (scenario B1quotas) keeps the aggregate symbolic effect and stirs it on women respondents too (both at 95% level) – contrary to expectations stipulated in H2.3.

As regards the evaluation of the system, the statistically significant effects concentrate exclusively on women respondents and reach statistical significance for both satisfaction with democracy and system responsiveness, but not for political inclusiveness (see Table 3). When all control variables are considered (Figure 2), these results only hold, though, for women (at 90% level) for the variables satisfaction with democracy and system responsiveness, which suggests that women may be more sensitive to positive gender schemas than men. These results lead us to accept H2.2 for women citizens only.

We had also hypothesized that the symbolic effects would decrease were gender quotas flagged up as the main vehicle for women's numerical gains in politics (scenario B1quotas). This is indeed the case according to the t-test (Table 3). The symbolic effects disappear in both countries for all groups for the two variables were they had been previously found, namely satisfaction with democracy and system responsiveness. This suggests that quotas still carry some prejudices; even if women are as competent and engaged as men, if they are identified as being elected through quotas, symbolic effects are likely to vanish, therefore we accept H2.3 for the case of the evaluation of the system indicators. Conversely, the t-test indicates that positive effects appear now on political inclusiveness (for both genders in Spain and only for men in Portugal). A positive frame of quotas has a clear impact on the citizens' evaluation of women's exclusion from politics. The estimated coefficients also show that symbolic effects concentrate in the positive scenario (B1quotas) for both women (at 90% level) and men (at 95% level) for political inclusiveness but no trace of them is found with regards to satisfaction for democracy and system responsiveness.

Lastly, our third hypothesis posited that when women's numerical increases are associated to an advocacy for women's interests female citizens are likely to evaluate the system more positively (scenario C1). The t-test analysis in Table 3 shows that this is only the case for the variable system responsiveness but only for the female subgroup

(at 95% level). For male respondents, increased attention to women's issues only affects their perception of political inclusiveness (at 90% level). Comparing the treatment groups to the control group, Figure 2 shows that, exposing citizens to a positive framing on how the political agenda has been engendered (scenario C1) or has remained unchanged (scenario C2) does not affect their satisfaction with democracy, but it does affect their perception of political inclusiveness and system responsiveness. These symbolic effects, which allow us to confirm H3, concentrate on women respondents for both variables when the treatment condition is positive (at 95% level), but also hold for political inclusiveness when the treatment is negative (at 90% level).

It is important to point out that the results presented in this section hold across both countries. This external validity increases our confidence in our findings of symbolic effects. However, in the case of scenario C1 probing into substantive representation, the results of the t-test presented in Table 3 only hold for Spain. Yet, the marginal effects exploring a more complete picture by comparing the treatment groups to the control group result in a similar non-significant effect for both aggregated and male sub-samples across both countries for the three variables measuring the evaluation of the system, but varying effects on women. We find significant effects for Portuguese women only on political inclusiveness (at 95% level) and system responsiveness (at 90% level), but non significant effects for Spanish – though significance levels are close to the 90% level. Exploring this difference, while intriguing, is beyond the scope of this paper.

5. Conclusions

Based on our unique experimental design embedded in representative Spanish and Portuguese surveys, we find support for framing effects on women's representation affecting citizens' political attitudes. Substantively, we show that respondents do adjust their attitudes in response to the information provided on greater women's representation and the effects their presence brings about. Overall, our study suggests that citizens perceive that women's descriptive representation is important for improving how the political system works. Although framing effects might well disappear a few days after the experiment has been administered (see Gaines et al. 2007), the results of our study have implications for how the 'politics of presence' is exposed to citizens. For example, the ways in which the media or the very same politicians frame policy debates on the need and means to increase women's

representation are likely to shape citizens' support for policies such as legislative quotas. Also, lower media coverage for female politicians, gender stereotyping and the frequent trivialization of their performance in office might well entail a 'symbolic annihilation' (Tuchman, 1978) for both women and men citizens, which may prevent 'engendering' politics at the mass level.

Our experimental study suggests that attitudinal changes are only observed for the evaluation of the system, not for political engagement. Women's representation and the outcomes of their presence seem to be more connected with the way citizens evaluate the political system than with their level of political engagement, although the latter has received much more scholarship attention, especially in the U.S. context. Since we only focused on the least active of the political engagement indicators, without disregarding the role model effect, our results indicate that symbolic representation is largely associated to legitimacy issues, such as perceptions of a more open and fairer political system and of more diverse representatives' profiles and legislative agendas.

Women are generally more likely to respond to the symbolic framing than men, as we had expected, but men also react positively to certain treatment conditions. As has been discussed, this finding should not be considered an anomaly nor counterintuitive since greater women's presence gives all citizens some cues about how the political system works. The traditionally overrepresented group, men, might well feel that the (relative) exclusion of other groups damages the legitimacy of democratic institutions. Conversely, the arrival of more women politicians may be considered to enhance representation for all groups.

The external validity achieved by administering our experiment in two different countries raises our confidence in the results obtained. We thus call scholars to further delve into symbolic representation by exploring experimental designs as a fertile approach to address some of the empirical and methodological challenges that make causal inference highly problematic with existing data. Since both ethnic majority men and women are overrepresented as compared with ethnic minority men and women, experimental designs also open new avenues to examine symbolic effects from an intersectional perspective.

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Appendix

Social composition of treatment groups (number of respondents)

Treatment	Sex		Age					Total
	Men	Women	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-65	
A1	147	146	44	59	71	65	54	293
A2	161	160	40	68	71	76	66	321
B1	147	152	40	66	72	62	59	299
B2	144	165	44	76	73	65	51	309
B1quotas	146	150	41	60	79	67	49	296
B2quotas	143	146	38	68	69	64	50	289
C1	154	151	38	61	84	68	54	305
C2	145	153	41	62	69	68	58	298
Control	161	158	42	74	71	70	62	319
Total	1348	1381	368	594	659	605	503	2729

Description of dependent variables

Citizens' political engagement

POLITICAL INTEREST. How interested would you say you are in politics? Not at all interested (1), Hardly interested (2), Quite interested (3), Very interested (4)

INTERNAL POLITICAL EFFICACY. Generally, politics seems so complicated that a person like me cannot understand what is going on Strongly agree (1), Agree (2), Disagree (3), Strongly disagree (4)

Evaluation of the political system

SATISFACTION WITH DEMOCRACY. Democracy works very well in Spain (Portugal) Does not apply at all (1), It applies a little, (2) It applies a lot (3), Totally applies (4)

POLITICAL INCLUSIVENESS. Women feel excluded from politics Totally applies (1), It applies a lot (2), It applies a little (3), Does not apply at all (4)

SYSTEM RESPONSIVENESS. The interests of all social groups are well reflected in the legislation and policies that are adopted Does not apply at all (1), It applies a little (2), It applies a lot (3), Totally applies (4)

Recoding applied when needed to have '4' as the most positive category.