Whose Interests? Third Wave Feminism and the Descriptive and Substantive Representation of Women and Feminists

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Abstract
Defining and re-defining feminist identity has long preoccupied feminist scholars and activists; moreover, in light of the increasing influence of queer theories, feminists continue to debate the utility of the categories ‘woman’ and ‘female’. Despite attempts to move away from dichotomous binaries that govern gender and feminist identities, inclusion and exclusion continue to frame much of the discourse. Hence, the construction of gender and feminist identities necessarily impacts upon our understanding of the issues surrounding political representation - who counts as female and who counts as a feminist? Scholars, in arguing for both the descriptive representation of women (the presence of women politicians) and the substantive representation of women (the representation of women’s interests), have sought to reject essentialist claims by making distinctions between the representation of women’s and feminist’s interests, and between the presence of female bodies and feminist minds (Childs, 2007). Who claims to speak on behalf of women and feminists, therefore, has implications for those interested in exploring gendered and feminist political representation. Indeed, epistemological and ontological questions necessarily frame how we explore who, where, when, why and how the representation of women and feminist interests occurs. Furthermore, when politicians claim to advance a feminist cause, which feminist cause are they referring to? Which types of feminists are represented and which excluded? This paper explores these issues within a third wave feminist paradigm: a framework that privileges intersectionality and a widening definition of feminism. The research draws together theoretical and empirical research undertaken in the UK and US in order to explore the challenges that the third wave poses to our understanding of political representation.

Introduction
Recent developments in much of the political representational literature has stressed the importance of adopting an intersectional lens to explore women’s electoral presence; arguing that it is not enough just to increase the number of women elected per se, but that we also need to account for greater diversity amongst those women elected (Smooth, 2006; Hughes, 2011; Hardy-Fanta, 2011). Scholars have also questioned how an intersectional approach might usefully be applied to understanding how, when, where and why the substantive representation of women’s interests occurs; acknowledging that, given women’s differences, what constitutes women’s interests may sometimes conflict and compete (Celis, 2009, 2012; Minta, 2012). This ‘intersectional turn’ within gender and politics scholarship is in response to the influential work of original intersectional theorists, such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, but also to the subsequent significance of intersectionality to the contemporary feminist movement (Lutz, Herrera Vivar and Supik, 2011). Bringing these two developments together, this paper draws upon interviews undertaken with activists to explore feminists’ attitudes to intersectionality and women’s political representation. The article supports the recent
observation by Phillips that applying intersectionality to political representation is a ‘daunting challenge’ (2012: 516) but also agrees with Smooth that it is a ‘mess worth making’ (2006), one that is vital to engaging feminist activists in the campaign for increasing and improving women’s representation.

Dominant shifts within the gender and politics literature has precipitated a move away from simply counting the number of women politicians to exploring how, what, when, where and why the substantive representation of women’s interests in Parliaments occur (Weldon, 2002; Dovi, 2007; Celis et al, 2009). In expanding the way in which we think about the links between descriptive and substantive representation, scholars have emphasised anti-essentialism and ideological plurality: thus, female bodies do not equal feminist minds (Childs, 2007); male bodies do not necessarily equal anti or non-feminist minds (Evans, 2012); and Conservative or centre right women can claim to act on behalf of women and feminists (Celis and Childs, 2012). The direction of such substantive representation scholarship that looks to multiple sites of representation, and adopts a more institutional approach, moreover has the potential to provide a better fit with an intersectional framework as scholars move beyond counting roll call votes to undertake more in depth institutional analysis. Moves like this, should ideally allow for more interaction between the research on women and minority representation and within and between intersectional research that addresses specific populations of women (Hancock, 2006: 249; Minta, 2012: 542). This interaction is particularly important given the increasing emphasis placed upon improving minority women’s representation.¹

Understanding how feminists view those who claim to speak on behalf of women and feminists (and indeed exploring who is ‘permitted’ to claim to speak for women and feminists), has implications for those interested in exploring gendered and feminist political representation. If we accept Saward’s model of the representative claim, in which the representative creates the framework (and conditions) within which a set of claims are constructed (Saward, 2010), then both the descriptive and substantive representation of women needs to be understood as a dynamic process of engagement between representatives and the plurality of feminist groups and activists; hence, the need for greater engagement with feminist activists. Indeed, given the lack of consensus surrounding what constitutes the women’s movement and feminist movement (McBride and Mazur, 2008:219), it is vital that gender and politics scholars investigating women’s substantive representation seek to engage with a wide range of feminists.

The paper begins by providing a brief review of the development of intersectionality as a concept and how it applies to work on political representation, before setting out the methodology, analysing the qualitative data gathered for this project, and finally considering the implications of applying an intersectional lens to established feminist approaches to political representation. The article concludes by arguing that feminist activists do not view women’s political representation as a top priority and, moreover, do not necessarily know how to reconcile an intersectional approach to women’s representation.

¹ See for instance in the US the Diversity Initiative as part of the Ready To Run campaign training for women at Centre for American Women in Politics http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/education_training/ReadytoRun/RtoR_overview.php and in the UK The Fawcett Society Women in Power campaign http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/activity/women-and-power/
Intersectionality and political representation

Intersectionality has become over the past two decades the theoretical approach de jour for many gender scholars (Davis, 2008). Conceptualised by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality denotes the multiple and overlapping layers of oppression that affect an individual’s life (1989, 1991); this conceptualization chimed with work that sought to explore how certain identities, typically those most commonly associated with identity politics, can only be understood within the narratives of other identities (Yuval-Davis, 2006). In the 1970s/80s US and UK women of color felt that their interests as black women were marginalised in (white) feminist analysis; this critique, first articulated as the need for an ‘integrated analysis and practice’ by the Combahee River Collective in 1977, led to the adoption of a double or ‘triple jeopardy’ approach to racism, sexism and classism. This three-pronged approach, however, was soon found wanting because it did not accurately reflect the ‘dynamics of multiple forms of oppression’ (King, 1988: 47). As such, the theory has evolved over time to explicitly include other points of discrimination, such as sexuality, age, religion, disability and weight (Hernandez and Rehman, 2002).

Intersectionality, as with most concepts, frames and discourses, is of course itself contested (Marx Ferree, 2009: 86); the term emphasises the importance of analysing power relations through the intersections between multiple layers of oppression and identities. As a theory it is notoriously difficult to work with (Jordan-Zachary, 2006: 255; Davis, 2008: 78). Furthermore, as this article explores, it is also a particularly difficult approach for feminist activists to adopt, especially when applying to political representation (Redfern and Aune, 2010:215). Whilst readily taken up by gender scholars over the past couple of decades as a way of resolving post-structuralist critiques of identity politics, intersectional theory is both incomplete and rather vague (Davis, 2008). Indeed, it is important to note that the identity markers within intersectionality, i.e. gender, race, sexuality and so on each have multiple meanings for individuals who construct and produce their own identity narrative (Marx Ferree, 2009: 87).

It is unsurprising that scholars have sought to highlight the importance of understanding women’s political representation through an intersectional lens (Smooth, 2006). However, whilst scholars have been keen to stress the need for intersecting identities of gender and race (Htun, 2004; Hardy-Fanta, 2011) and to a less extent gender, race and class (Strolovitch, 2007; Reingold and Smith, 2012), it is not clear how the intersectional framework should be developed to encompass other intersectional points of oppression, not least the current debates surrounding trans-inclusion. This latter point is particularly salient given its importance to current debates within feminist communities in both the US and UK. Underpinning the vast majority of feminist research into women’s political representation is the implicit assumption that female bodies matter. However, what is less clear is whether these assumptions adequately respond to the shifting nature of woman and female as discrete categories. Whilst feminist research has noted that gender is a spectrum rather than a binary (Butler, 1994) this has yet to result in analysis of women’s descriptive representation that

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2 Debates surrounding trans-inclusion have been particularly contentious within UK feminist circles over the past few years, with an explicit ‘women born women’ entrance policy at the annual RadFem conferences. For a response to this policy see http://www.thefword.org.uk/blog/2012/05/theres_nothing These debates, to a certain extent, mirror discussions within US feminist circles, notably the opposition of high profile individuals like Cathy Brennan to trans-gender inclusion http://bugbrennan.com/.
goes beyond simply counting the number of female bodies present (oftentimes this is also done by proxy – whether using the IPU datasets or simply looking at photos on Parliamentary websites). This is clearly inadequate if we accept the claims from some within the queer-community who argue that the term ‘woman’ or ‘female’ cannot be reduced to ‘mere’ biology (Butler, 1994). How do those seeking to explore the descriptive representation of women therefore, deal with a born male who identifies as female but has not undergone sex reassignment surgery and thus presents to the external world as male? Likewise, when scholars make judgements regarding what constitutes the substantive representation of women and/or feminist interests, what are the underlying assumptions regarding feminism and feminist priorities?

Data
In exploring intersectionality and political representation, this article draws upon 30 interviews with feminists conducted in the US (New York) and UK (London) between August 2011 and August 2012. Given the centrality of intersectionality every effort was made to ensure that the research design engaged with a wide range of feminist activists diverse in their age, race, gender, religion and sexuality. To that end interviews were conducted with transgender, cis-gender and gender queer feminists, as well as with women of color, Muslim, Christian and atheist feminists – I highlight these particular feminists because of the specific standpoints that they tend to represent within feminist debates concerning white cis-privilege and reproductive rights (Johnson, 2013). Feminist activists were asked, amongst other issues, to consider political representation, and specifically to reflect upon what an intersectional feminist political representation might look like.

The face to face interviews were carried out in London and New York which means that the responses cannot be considered to be representative of all US and UK feminists. Accordingly, this research does not attempt to provide the definitive ‘feminist activist response’ to women’s representation; rather it is intended to provide an initial, time and location specific analysis of how intersectionality influences feminist attitudes to political representation amongst two particular groups of feminist activists; a comparison based on some shared characteristics (both are liberal western democracies with active and diverse feminist groups and campaigns) and some differences (political systems, culture and specific legacies of race and class). Perhaps most importantly for the purposes of this project, the US and UK share an approach to intersectionality, one that is grounded in a rejection of essentialist notions of identity (Prins, 2006: 278); as an approach it is central to contemporary feminist activism in the US and UK. The research is intended, then, to contribute to developing an intersectional framework for political representation - to raise additional questions - and to explore opportunities for subsequent feminist dialogue that seeks to bridge academic-activist divides.

Descriptive Representation
The descriptive representation of women refers in everyday terms to the number of women present in a legislature. Gender and politics scholars have long been committed to exploring the reasons behind, and evaluating solutions for, the numerical (or descriptive) under representation of women in politics (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Lawless and Fox, 2005; Krook, 2009), whilst some research has also analysed the under representation of minority women (Smooth, 2006; Stokes-Brown and Dolan, 2010; Durose et al, 2013). For the most part this literature has tended to address the presence of female bodies at both the aggregate and party level.
Women are under-represented in both US and UK legislative politics: in the former women constitute 18% in the House of Representatives and 20% in the Senate, whilst in the latter women make up just 22% of the House of Commons, and 23% of the House of Lords. Of course the approach to increasing women’s descriptive representation differs in the US and UK, not least because of the very different party and candidate selection process. In the UK the provision for political parties to introduce sex based quotas at the point of selection has only been undertaken by the Labour party (the same party that introduced the legislation) whilst in the US, with the primary selection system and a strong incumbency bias, there are fewer opportunities for political parties to manipulate the process and outcome (Darcy, Welch and Clark, 1994).

Within both the US and the UK there exist prominent national organisation that campaign for an increase in women’s descriptive representation including: in the US, the Feminist Majority Foundation (http://www.feminist.org/) and NOW (http://www.now.org/); and in the UK, The Fawcett Society (http://www.fawcettssociety.org.uk/) and The Centre for Women and Democracy (http://www.cfwd.org.uk/). These are complemented by leading academic centres which focus on women’s representation, such as the Centre for Women and Politics in the US (http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/) and the Centre for the Advancement of Women and Politics in the UK (http://www.qub.ac.uk/cawp/). In both countries there are, in addition to the academic study of women’s descriptive representation, high profile, research driven (or well-informed) campaigns dedicated to the analysis of women’s political representation. That said, whilst some popular feminist texts may highlight the issue of women’s representation (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000; Banyard, 2010) it is an issue that is largely left to politicians, academics and professional feminist groups. In truth, it is leading women politicians and large national women’s groups who remain the public face of the campaigns to increase women’s representation.

ELECTING MORE WOMEN has/had been an important cornerstone of what we might loosely term ‘second wave feminism’, but it is an issue that some scholars critique for its lack of radicalism - largely because it reforms existing institutions without offering a more ‘substantive vision’ of structural and societal gendered inequalities (Dean, 2010: 72). This critical characterisation inevitably raises questions regarding how much of a priority increasing women’s representation is, or should be, to contemporary feminist activists who are not active members of either the large professionalised women’s organizations or political parties. It also highlights a problem for those organisations who are promoting the issue in terms of soliciting the support of feminist activists.

Indeed, when asked about women’s representation 25 of the 30 interviewees in both the US and UK regarded it as a relatively important goal for feminism, but there was not much enthusiasm for taking an active role in campaigns, and at least two thirds suggested there were more important feminist priorities:

Yeah, it’s important to mobilize on this. Representation is important, but it’s just not my priority. I’m more interested in helping women directly.

(US feminist)

3 For more detailed analysis of women’s representation at the state level see Reingold, 2000 and for analysis of devolved institutions in the UK see Mackay and McAllister, 2012
I am interested in getting more women MPs, I think it’s really important for there to be more women in Westminster, *I suppose it’s just not my number one concern*, I mean I’m not a member of a political party myself so I suppose I don’t feel there’s an obvious way to be involved. (*UK feminist*)

Of these same women, 20 interviewees saw descriptive representation as important, in principle, but less so for them personally. They perceived it to be a broader national campaign and one that did not really engage them vis-à-vis their own feminist activism. There was a sense moreover that the campaigns surrounding women’s representation was the preserve of women in Washington or Westminster, specifically for those women who wanted to run for office, creating a separation between the feminist activist and the woman would-be politician. The stated lack of interest in actively campaigning for increased women’s representation is in many respects unsurprising; active participation in electoral politics per se is very low in both the US and the UK (*Young, 2000:4*) although interest in politics more broadly defined (particularly post-economic crash) is still very much in evidence (*Jacobs, Lomax Cook and Delli Carpini, 2009*).

Whilst the majority of interviewees agreed that increasing women’s representation was important, if not their priority, five interviewees, were wary of supporting calls for better descriptive representation. In their view, it was the acceptance and reinforcement of patriarchal values and institutions which served to ensure women remained oppressed, through violence, objectification and poverty. As the following interviewee notes, the problems of representation in Congress can seem far removed from the more fundamental problems of inequality facing African Americans.4 For her, the issue of women’s representation was something privileged by ‘white middle class women’ and for her ultimately the focus of the feminist movement should be on grassroots activism:

> The structure of this country was set up such as to minimize participation and engagement so what’s happening in the halls of Congress and who’s there, whilst really important to me, is not really what I would stake out as the key battlegrounds. You know it’s been only still less than 50 years that African American people have gotten the right to vote [...]. There’s a huge amount of voter disenfranchisement. (*US feminist*)

The differing political systems operating within the US and UK mean that the solutions to addressing the under representation of women in politics differ greatly. In the UK debates concerning women’s representation at Westminster has been dominated by demand–side solutions such as party sex quotas (*Norris and Lovenduski, 1995*), whilst in the US there has been greater emphasis on fundraising for women candidates and tackling supply-side constraints through the promotion of EMILY’s List (*Lawless and Fox, 2005*). Amongst feminists on both sides of the Atlantic there was agreement about a lack of willpower (in other words demand) on the part of political parties to do enough to increase the number of women:

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4 During discussions surrounding descriptive representation, interviewees were asked explicitly about intersectionality if they hadn’t already mentioned it (which at least 18 of them did before prompting). In their responses to the question of women’s representation, interviewees explicitly highlighted the competing demands of adopting an intersectional approach when considering the importance of descriptive representation, explored in greater detail below.
Well it’s obvious that the parties don’t take it seriously, I mean Labour have quotas which is great but there are very few prominent women MPs that I can think of…*women just seem to be absent* (UK feminist)

The Democrats are way ahead on this but there’s still a really long way to go but I guess *it just doesn’t feel like anyone is really taking the issue seriously* you know? We have all the economic debate and so on that just kind of dominates. (US feminist)

Both US and UK feminists highlighted the inter party differences in women’s descriptive representation, in leftist parties’ favour, and were aware of the fact that both Labour in the UK and the Democrats in the States appeared more committed to getting more women elected. When pushed on how this under representation might be addressed through the use of quotas (something that can more readily be applied in the UK) there was more division amongst the UK feminists, both for and against quotas. Specifically, whether sex quotas were sufficient to deliver the *right kind* of descriptive representation, with the latter concern evident in the second quotation which talks especially about differences between women:

Labour’s done a great job with all women shortlists – they’ve really led the way (UK feminist)

My issue with quotas and things like positive discrimination is that it only really seems to address one aspect. So *where is the focus on race or on class?* As far as I know things like the Labour party’s policy on women shortlists really only seems to benefit certain types of women. (UK feminist)

The latter quotation resonates with themes that emerged particularly strongly from the US interviews. Namely that the broader issue of women’s representation, seem to be conflated with the increased election of white middle class women to office:

It’s good that we campaign for more women but it’s *always the same women*. America is a diverse country and women make up half the population we want all types of women in positions of power. (US feminist)

Sure we want more women in politics but it’s *not like women are some sort of homogeneous group*, you have to be rich to get there, or at least be willing to spend your life fundraising. That has implications for poorer women and women of color especially. (US feminist)

When pushed about what an intersectional approach to descriptive representation might look like, several US feminists argued that it was about a ‘mindset’ and a specific approach to women’s representation. Thus, to them a commitment to intersectionality need not necessarily result in what John Adams described as mirror representation (Pitkin, 1967), but would instead constitute a willingness to acknowledge that political structures privilege certain types of women over others. An intersectional approach to political representation would, therefore, simply require, as one US interviewee noted, ‘an awareness of the intersecting forms of oppression and privilege that we represent’. Conversely, in the UK there were some concerns over the language of quotas and in particular of the phrase all women shortlist:

I think probably gender quotas is better than all women shortlist – it’s a bit cis-centric (UK feminist)
I guess all women shortlists might be a bit exclusive. I mean I know that women refers to all types of women and to those who identify as women but maybe it doesn’t send that kind of signal to trans-women? (UK feminist).

During the UK interviews there was less fulsome discussion of race and class which was somewhat surprising given the continued importance of class and ongoing debates concerning multiculturalism. However, the concern surrounding cis-privilege is reflective of current debates surrounding trans-inclusion in the UK. Whilst most of the UK feminist activists might accept that ‘all women’ is sufficiently inclusive, at least two interviewees as illustrated above perceived it to reflect cis-privilege and was a term that demonstrated ‘a complete ignorance’ of the issues faced by those who consider themselves to be women when society does not. Conversely, others openly engaged with (and explicitly cited) Spivak’s notion of strategic essentialism (Spivak, 1996) as an important political strategy for advancing women’s interests. Contra to much of the current debates concerning trans-feminism and cis-centrism, only two interviewees highlighted this as an issue when considering women’s descriptive representation and this was specifically in relation to the use of quotas in the UK.

US feminists were much more open and explicit in their intersectionality, for them descriptive representation meant the descriptive representation of all women. The discursive and political need for mobilisation thus appeared to be one concerned with both race and class in terms of diversity amongst women politicians – recall these were little discussed in the context of the UK, where BME populations constitute more than 10 percent of the population - rather than a wholesale rejection of the focus on what is essentially female representation. Whilst none of the US interviewees discussed cis-privilege, several did note the importance of getting trans women elected as part of a broader need for elected women to represent all women:

> We need all women in Washington and in state legislatures, city councils and school boards: women of color, older women, gay women, straight women, trans women, disabled women. We need the whole lot otherwise women aren’t being represented only some women are. (US feminist)

> It’s got to be more than just white straight women. I mean take the issue of trans women, we need to make sure that all women get the chance to serve in elected office if they want to, and that they know that all those organisations that campaign for women will also be there for them. (US feminist)

**Substantive Representation**

The substantive representation of women (SRW) refers to the representation of women’s interests; those who either claim to be acting on behalf of women, or whose actions are interpreted as such, can be seen as acting in the interests of the represented (Pitkin, 1967). Gender scholars have attempted to avoid essentialist predictions regarding the links between women’s electoral presence and any policy benefits for women (Young, 2000); and there is

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5 Spivak advocated strategic essentialism as a temporary measure to advance a social movement, the term was widely misinterpreted as a defence of essentialism. In fact Spivak suggested that the temporary nature of the identification, which in itself would be more indicative of a performance, did not require individuals to accept the essentialist identity of a group as a reality, but rather as a political mechanism for change.
a growing awareness that acting for women can be motivated by a wide range of ideological beliefs (Celis and Childs, 2012), and can include male politicians acting for women (Celis, 2011; Evans, 2012). However, it is somewhat inevitable that scholars should seek to explore the links between the DRW and SRW, particularly when the latter is frequently deployed as an argument in favour of increasing the former.

The idea of SRW can be further developed by distinguishing between process and outcome analysis of the substantive representation of women: the difference between the actual process (e.g. debate) which does not necessarily require an outcome (e.g. legislation) (Childs 2004; Franceschet and Piscopo, 2008). This becomes particularly important when considering how an intersectional approach might be identified within the SRW. For instance, the preliminary debates that occur in committees but that do not make it into the final wording of the bill might mean that certain kinds of women are excluded or explicitly included. Beyond being asked if they could identify specific pieces of legislation that might constitute women’s substantive representation, interviewees were asked to think about whether women’s interests and feminist interests are easy to identify.

The interviewees were asked what they would consider elected politicians acting on behalf of women to look like. Their responses to a very great extent mirrored the problems with measuring this that emerge within the existing academic literature (Reingold, 2000; Minta, 2012). In short feminists in both the US and UK found it hard to establish or ‘to prove’ when women politicians might act for other women or even what might constitute acting on behalf of women:

Acting for women is going to be hard because women aren’t just one homogenous group. Women have different views on things and you can’t just claim to be representing women. I suppose you could look at their voting records on equality and on abortion (UK feminist)

I think that would be difficult to claim that you’re representing women – you can’t represent everyone and women are half the population. How can you claim to represent them on any given issue? (US feminist)

Although the two interviewees above, in common with the vast majority of other interviewees, went on to try to explain what they thought the kinds of issues might be that would justify such a claim this inevitably slipped into talking about feminist representation (Celis, 2006; Tremblay and Pelletier, 2000).

That’s a tough one, I guess it’s very personal on one level, you know your own personal views. Even with things like abortion some anti-choice people claim to be feminists so they might view women taking that line as representing women. (US feminist)

This was a theme that was developed throughout the interview when interviewees were asked what they might consider the representation of feminist interests to look like:

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6 See for instance the UK’s failed Dual Discrimination clause in the Equality Act which would have allowed claimants to pursue two claims of discrimination, eg race and sex (Krizsan, Skeie and Squires, 2012:17)
I guess there are issues that you might assume a certain feminist position on – for me it would definitely be about reproductive rights and gender based violence. But I guess other feminists would say different things and have different ways of viewing the world. Maybe it’s easier to say what isn’t the political representation of women’s interests – so the anti-choice lobby or cutting grants for women’s groups. (US feminist)

That’s really difficult, I mean who am I to say whether someone’s a feminist or not? Part of me thinks well you know feminism when you see it but that’s really problematic too! My version of feminism won’t be the same as the next person’s and so on. (UK feminist)

Apart from abortion and reproductive rights (which in itself was acknowledged to be contested even amongst feminists) interviewees tended to talk about feminist interests at a general level, few identified particular topics which reinforces the difficulties of agreeing on a ‘list’ of feminist issues to be represented.

As is apparent from the above sets of quotations there was widespread confusion concerning what precisely constituted the substantive representation of women, this finding is not altogether surprising given the context specific nature of women’s interests (Celis, 2012). There were broader comments regarding the ways in which certain political parties (again the Democrats and Labour) were better known for taking an interest in women’s issues whilst at the same time, particularly amongst US feminists a willingness to engage with the idea that conservative feminism has been building momentum, even whilst they themselves critiqued it (Rymph, 2006).

At least a third raised concerns about certain high profile politicians being seen as ‘representing all feminists’ (Hilary Clinton and Harriet Harman were the two most frequently mentioned women politicians). Indeed, and returning to the kinds of women who get elected, there was a sense that women politicians sometimes reinforced the idea that all feminists are concerned about is white middle class women’s issues; there was a strong desire to focus more on the grassroots as the real manifestation of feminist activism, where the real representation (in terms of outcomes) of women’s interests occurs.

I think we should be focussed more on getting the next generation of women activists trained up to work for women’s rape crisis centres or pro-choice campaigns. You know, campaigns on the ground that actually make a difference to women’s lives rather than lobbying Congress when it takes so long to get anything changed. (US feminist)

I think it’s great that there are people who care enough to campaign to get more women elected and that some of those women might introduce legislation to make our society more feminist. But for me the real feminist work is done working at a more localised and grassroots level, delivering services speaking to school children about objectification and so on. (UK feminist)

This supports claims made in the academic literature which has sought to identify the women’s movements and extra-legislative activities as being an important site of women’s representation (Weldon, 2002), but begs questions of association and mobilization between the sites.
Rather than talking in the abstract about how one might claim to be acting on behalf of women or feminists, the interviewees felt more comfortable discussing examples of when feminist legislation had been passed. US feminists cited Lilly Ledbetter and importance of Roe v Wade,7 whilst UK feminists talked about some of the improvements that were made under the New Labour Governments (1997-2010) such as the introduction of the Minimum Wage or the Sure Start programme, policies which disproportionately benefitted women, and especially poorer women.8

It was clear that whilst interviewees could identify certain individual acts there was a general sense of pessimism on both sides of the Atlantic regarding the status of women’s and feminist issues and a pervasive feeling that the issues themselves weren’t deemed as important as other issues to either governments or the women politicians:

I just don’t see them (politicians) speaking to a feminist agenda; you know they’ll do it when it suits them but otherwise they’re in it for themselves. (US feminist)

I can’t say I’ve really picked up on many MPs actively trying to pursue issues that are important to feminists, but then maybe the media don’t report it or it’s because I’m not that into Westminster politics. (UK feminist)

As the above quotations highlight there was a degree of cynicism regarding politicians (including women politicians) and how and when politicians might choose to engage in feminist representation. Moreover, the point raised by the UK feminist regarding media coverage is particularly salient given both the under representation of women politicians in the media and the heavily gendered coverage they receive when they do appear (Bligh et al, 2012; Ross et al 2013).

The issue of exclusion, which had been much more apparent in the discussions concerning the descriptive representation of women, became less prominent when interviewees were asked to consider substantive representation. In the UK particular biological concerns (specifically those concerning women’s health) were discussed, often interchangeably, as ‘women’s’ or ‘feminist’ issues. This differed to the US where several interviewees still sought to specific which types of women might be excluded from certain discourses:

I mean take reproductive rights, you know we can’t just talk Roe v Wade [... ] we need to go beyond that and address the continued inequality that women of color face when going through childbirth. These issues aren’t championed by the national groups because they only represent a certain type of woman. (US feminist)

What we don’t want is to assume that women’s issues are all the same; issues affecting me as a young white college graduate living in New York are very different

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7 The Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act was signed into Federal Law by President Obama in 2009; it amends the 1964 Civil Rights Act allowing employees to more easily file an equal pay lawsuit based upon discrimination. Roe v Wade was the 1973 Supreme Court ruling that determined the constitutionality of abortion.

8 The New Labour Government introduced the first national minimum wage in 1998. Sure Start was a government initiative to provide funds to improve childcare, health, family support and education in some of the poorest areas of the country.
from those experienced by say women of color in the south who may be struggling to pay bills on a low wage job. Their interests and rights have to be championed too. (US feminist)

The interaction between race and sex was a leitmotif throughout many of the US interviews in their discussions of both descriptive and substantive representation (although many also mentioned other points of intersectionality). This is unsurprising given the prominence of race in both US history, politics and discourse and, more specifically, the profound impact of black feminist thinkers on feminist praxis (Collins, 2000). This dual approach to understanding the substantive representation of women meant that many of the interviewees automatically considered the racial dimensions of any given issue that one could reasonably claim to be part of a women’s or feminist agenda. This same attention to, and awareness of, race was not as apparent in the interviews with UK feminists, beyond a feeling amongst many that it was important to get a diversity of women elected including diversity of race and ethnicity, as one UK feminist observed: “you know we can’t just talk women’s representation, it masks too much diversity and that’s really what we need in Westminster, diversity.”

Beyond race (and occasionally class) the other significant point of intersectionality discussed was that of sexuality. For at least a third of the feminists in both the UK and US ensuring the visibility of specific lesbian issues in the political sphere was deemed to be very important. Very often, as with women’s issues, there tended to be a conflation between lesbian, women and feminist issues. One UK feminist noted that it was usually ‘radical lesbian feminists’ who were at the forefront of campaigns to support access to abortion and who were more able to highlight and resist forms of male gendered violence. Whilst at least five US feminists noted the high profile role played by New York Senator Karen Gillibrand in championing gay and lesbian rights. Other points of intersectionality, including disability, weight and age were only touched upon briefly (usually taking the form of a list of how we should avoid viewing women as a homogenous group).

Given academic suggestions that men, in principle, can act for women, this possibility was directly explored with interviewees. Again, around two thirds of the feminists interviewed in both the US and UK were open to the idea that men could represent women’s interests: “for sure men can represent women, I mean women can represent men so the reverse must be true” (US feminist) and “of course men can represent women on a whole range of issues especially if they’re of the same political viewpoint as you” (UK feminist). Indeed, in discussing how men could help represent women’s interests some interviewees claimed that some male politicians, such as feminist men and pro-choice men specifically, might be preferable to some women politicians:

*I’d rather vote for a pro choice man than a pro life woman*. For me that’s the line in the sand (US feminist)

Yes I think some men do take an interest, although probably not many male MPs...maybe around issues to do with childcare, there are younger men who get that it shouldn’t just be the women’s responsibility? (UK feminist)

For these interviewees, sex and gender did not necessarily preclude politicians from acting on behalf of women. Indeed some thought it would be a good thing if more men felt like they wanted to take an interest in women’s issues. For many of the feminists there was no sense of
‘ownership’ over the issues, although some interviewees did raise objections to the idea that men would simply ‘take over’ the women’s agenda leaving women completely disempowered: “I think it would be great if male politicians started speaking to the interests of feminists but it should be women at the forefront, the last thing we want are just male solutions to the problems raised by feminists” (US feminist).

US feminists sought to highlight Obama’s work for women, comparing it to the ‘anti-feminist’ stance of women like Michelle Bachmann who claim to be feminist. This suggests that for feminist activists at least, the substantive representation of women does equal the substantive representation of feminists. For them issues of representation appeared to be much more closely bound up with an intersectional approach and one that was ultimately less dependent on the sex of the elected representative. Whilst none of the UK feminists mentioned by name any male politicians who they considered to have acted on behalf of women, the overwhelming majority believed that men could be feminist and that, more importantly, the gendered nature of all issues meant that it shouldn’t just be women that are thought about: “it can’t just be about representing women we also need to think about how men and masculinities are impacted by the law and the people that make it” (UK feminist).

Discussion and conclusion: This article has sought to highlight and explore the various challenges and opportunities that an intersectional lens might bring to the study of gendered political representation. In so doing, it has sought to give voice to feminist activists - a group who are not often included in debates concerning women’s representation. Adopting a comparative approach it draws on interviews with feminist activists in the US and UK in order to explore how important women’s political representation is to contemporary feminist activists. Most importantly, this article has explored how intersectionality, as understood by feminist activists, raises some additional conceptual challenges for feminist scholars regarding women’s political representation. In particularly, it has highlighted that many feminist activists on both sides of the Atlantic, do not consider the issue of women’s under representation to be a ‘top priority’. Sure, there was expressed interest in the issue but it was considered to be more the preserve of political parties and the national women’s organisations, which they saw as somewhat distant/distinct from their own feminist politics/praxis. The discourse surrounding women’s representation was interpreted by both UK and US feminists as referring to a certain type of woman – white, middle class and heterosexual. This discourse was perceived to contribute towards the slight distance that many feminist activists felt towards the issue and underpinned their assumptions of a limited impact that simply increasing numbers would have on ending structural gendered inequality.

Differences between the US and UK approaches were most apparent in respect of the discursive framing of women’s representation. In the US this constituted an approach rather than outcome – mediated by the fact that sex based quotas are not applicable. Whilst in the UK there was some divergence in opinion with the suggestion that the framing of quotas as it is currently constituted is too restrictive. There was no sense from either feminists in the US or UK that the fixed nature of quotas or striving to attain a certain number of elected women was problematic. Furthermore, there was no real sense that achieving parity was anything other than an important issue, albeit one from which the majority felt removed and distanced from. One of the key findings of this albeit small sample of interviews conducted with feminists in the US and UK is the extent to which intersectionality is much further developed in the US than in the UK. The activists in the US were much more comfortable using intersectional discourse; framing their responses in such a way as to signal the centrality of
the approach to their feminist politics. Reflecting on why this might be the case, we can look to the fact that intersectionality emerged from the US and was able to attain an institutional acceptance through women’s studies scholarship, something now largely missing from the UK. We might also, in understanding why intersectionality is more advanced in the US, perhaps point to the continued racial inequalities that come from a specific political and historical context which has given an intersectional approach a greater sense of urgency in the US.

For academics, activists, political parties and civil society organisations concerned with addressing and measuring the representation of women this research raises several conceptual and empirical/practical challenges: (1) how to engage active, vocal and committed feminists who feel distanced and disconnected from what might be considered a professionalised or ‘top down’ approach to increasing the descriptive representation of women; (2) how to further the feminist cause of increasing the descriptive representation of women, whilst at the same time acknowledging the specific and important role men and trans women can play in the representation of women’s interests; and (3) how to address intersectionality and plurality of identity amongst women, without sacrificing the political efficacy of broader gender and sex based labels in underpinning arguments about both women’s descriptive and substantive representation.

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