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Section: S03 Power and Representation
Panel: P068 Gender, Power and Representation at the Local Level
Date/ Time: Saturday 13th June, 11:00 - 12:45
Building: University Building Room: X

Title: Representation at the Local Level: what’s gender got to do with it?

Abstract:
The relationship between the elected and the electorate is central to the representative claim, not merely in the consenting moments of election, but through the ensuing “interactive process of interest articulation” (Celis, 2012). This involves multiple actors within (and outwith) each constituency where debates about the descriptive and substantive representation of women continue to inform and challenge notions of representativeness.

Firmly situated within current debates about the gendered nature of representation, and moving beyond the site of national political institutions, this paper explores the representative claims of local (ward) councillors in an English region of the UK. Preliminary findings from interviews with both male and female councillors will be presented. Comparative analysis of how these elected local representatives understand and articulate their own claims of representativeness has potential to deepen our understanding of its reflexive and constitutive nature, based on three distinct features of UK local authority level politics:

1. local services are perceived to be more congruent with ‘women’s interests’ (Phillips, 1996)
2. the “dynamic process of claims” (Saward, 2010) is conducted through more dense vertical relationships than in parliamentary constituencies
3. local level ward teams potentially provide a rich horizontal seam of political relationships for both increased descriptive representation and more nuanced substantive representation of diverse ‘women’s interests’

“parliamentary strategies are important, but not necessarily the only political means for improving the lives of women as a group.” (Celis et al, 2008)
This paper explores the experiences of women and men councillors in a sub-region of England, UK. The gendered aspects of ward-level casework are highlighted. These findings from interviews are examined using a feminist institutionalist lens, to identify whether the gendered responsibilities are a result of mechanisms which can be framed as informal ‘rules in use’.

Context

The role of UK local government is still significant in terms of resources, responsibilities and relationships at the local level. As a site of power, local government in England accounts for a quarter of all public spending – in 2014-2015, this amounted to £98.8 billion.

As a statutory body, local government has a range of responsibilities which although diminished still includes significant areas of control and other areas of regulation, legislation and inspection.

There are 351 local authorities and 18,111 councillors in England REF.

In the North East, the Tyne and Wear sub-region comprises five local government areas and each of these five councils is a unitary authority (single tier, not a county with a tier of districts below). The population of this sub-region is 1.1 million residents (2011 estimate). Across the five councils, there is a total of 333 elected councillors (plus one Elected Mayor for one of the areas).

The descriptive representation of women in political life is the source of campaigns due to the continuing low levels of women in elected political roles. At national government level, just 23% of Members of Parliament were women (Keen, March 2015). However in local government, the proportion is slightly higher as women councillors made up 32% of all councillors in England (Fawcett Society, 2014). It has been suggested that women have more affinity to local government due to its physical proximity to where they live (given their continuing primary responsibilities for the care of children, as well as elderly and sick relatives); and also because of the correlation between the services provided by local government and the concerns of women (see for instance, Mackay, 2001; Phillips, 1996).

This paper is based on research undertaken with councillors in the Tyne and Wear sub region, where the proportion of women is almost 50% of the elected councillors (145 women out of the total of 333 councillors).

It has been argued that increasing the descriptive representation of women is insufficient to achieve improved substantive representation for women. The arguments for a ‘critical mass’ or increasing from “a small to a large minority” (Dahlerup, 1988) continue to have some traction, with the goal of 30-40% women in elected and other governing structures seen as desirable. However, it is acknowledged that individual critical actors may also be significant in moving forward agendas which address ‘women’s concerns’; and ‘networks’ between women in elected, policy and civil society roles are also important sites of study and analysis.

This paper seeks to establish whether feminist institutionalism is a useful tool for examining the experiences of women councillors in a local government where they have achieved ‘critical mass’;
where there are women in key political roles (‘critical actors’) and where there are established networks of feminist actors working across both formal and informal political arenas.

The research study includes individual interviews undertaken with 20 councillors (10 women and 10 men). At the time of the interviews, across the sub-regional area, 44% of the total number of councillors were women (145 out of 333). In each of the five local councils, the percentage of female councillors was between 39% and 48%. The interviewees represented a cross-section of the councillors in the area of study. They were from different political parties, and they had differing lengths of service – some had been councillors for many years, representing the same ward for the whole time; others were newly elected and in their first term of office as a councillor; still others had served for varying periods of time and some had had more than one term of office in different wards.

A Council comprises all the elected councillors for the local authority area, which is divided into smaller areas called wards. The political environment includes a variety of formal institutions, at the ward level. The ward itself is an administrative geographical area delineated by the council, each having an approximately similar number of residents. Councillors are elected to represent a specific ward and each ward has three councillors. When these councillors belong to the same political party, they can form a ‘team’ of two or three, and work together on ward business.

Part of the role of each councillor is to be responsive to requests from residents living within the ward which the councillor represents. Residents contact the councillors individually with their issues. The resident can contact any one of the three councillors – the resident decides. Every councillor has a large volume of casework from residents in their ward. Councillors also hold regular ward based meetings for residents, to discuss ward issues, city issues which affect residents or the ward, and to distribute small grant funding for local issues. The councillors select which of them will be the chair or they have a rota for chairing the meetings.

New institutionalism has been defined as “concerned not only with formal rules and structures but also with the informal conventions and coalitions that shape political behaviour. … it does not take political institutions at face value; instead it takes a critical look at the way in which they embody values and power relationships.” (Lowndes, 2009, p. 92)

As such, this research study seeks to examine not only the institutions that shape political activity at the ward level, but also the customs and conventions that are beneath the surface but integral to the formal institutions. In this, Mackay et al (2010) have investigated why informal institutions exist and what work they do, offering a number of options, including “a more dynamic interplay between ‘rules-in-form’ (formalized rules) and ‘rules-in-use’ (the do’s and don’ts that actors learn on the ground) (Ostrom, 1990; see also Leach and Lowndes, 2007).” (p.576). The work that councillors undertake at the ward level is bounded by political institutions both formal and informal, and this study has found that these are highly gendered.

It is therefore necessary to consider “the interplay between gender and the operation and effect of political institutions” (Mackay, Kenny and Chappell, 2010, p.574) and an examination of “how the
gendered organisation of political life makes a difference” (Lowndes, 2014 p.685, emphasis in original).

Each ward has three elected representatives. They may be from the same political party or different parties, or be independent. They may share individual characteristics – gender, age, socio-economic class, ethnicity – or be different. They have varying personal circumstances – living within or outside the ward; being parents or not; being employed or retired; etc. This study is concerned with the differences (or not) which are apparent in relation to gender – whether the women councillors experience their ward role differently to the men who are councillors, and if so, what factors determine that, including the role played by councillors themselves as agents.

One of the main duties, and certainly one of the most time-consuming for all councillors, is the casework. Casework is presented by a resident to their elected representative as an ‘enquiry’ and can be an individual problem, concern, complaint or request. This may relate to council services and responsibilities, but sometimes does not – it may be a police or health or public transport matter, but the councillor is expected to ‘represent’ the resident by seeking information from the council or other body, by following up matters and generally ‘acting for’ the resident. Within a ward, the resident contacts a councillor directly and as there are three councillors, which one receives the enquiry may be a random decision or may be a deliberate choice by the resident. For instance, a councillor may receive more enquiries because their name appears first (usually alphabetically) on the ward contact list; a councillor may have dealt with that individual before; or the resident has been told about a good outcome that a councillor achieved for someone else with a similar case.

In this study, councillors also mentioned that sometimes that decision is based on gender. It is seen as appropriate for women councillors to receive enquiries to deal with certain issues and for men councillors with others. This perception is held by both residents and by some councillors, and was referred to as part of the explanation for ‘gender balance’ in ward teams (i.e. at least one of the three councillors for each ward should be a woman). When pressed to explain why it was important for a team to include women as well as men, the most frequently provided response was that women have different life experiences than men and so are able to respond more appropriately to some enquiries from residents. The examples given raise questions about whether this is an acknowledgement of individual expertise or reflects deeply ingrained gendered expectations. Dealing with concerns related to children was specifically cited as an example where women would be better placed to deal with the enquiry, and this was irrespective of whether the female councillor had children, and also disregarded the male councillors who are parents.

Lowndes has noted how rules-in-use “constrain some actors and empower others through gendered processes of regulation, obligation, and narration” (2014, p.690) and this example of gendered expectation regarding enquiries related to children reflects this. The ‘regulation’ of casework leads councillors retaining responsibility for an enquiry unless there is an obvious reason to pass it to a colleague (such as, they are already dealing with it or something closely linked to it). The ‘obligation’ of casework means that a councillor retains ownership of each enquiry until it resolved (or exhausted). The ‘narration’ of casework, as exemplified in these interviews, demonstrates a ‘different but equal’ narrative regarding gender i.e. women councillors may receive more enquiries
related to children, but that is because they have an expertise in this area. The expertise may be more a perception of the part of the residents than a fact, but if the resident contacts that councillor, that is their choice.

It is clear that the councillors’ political activity related to ward-level casework is shaped by “the informal rules, norms and practices” (Kenny 2014) operating within political institutions, and that these are highly gendered.

Experiences of women as reported in interviews do not show a gender-neutral environment, although women councillors rarely reported overt discrimination (unlike examples from Fawcett, 2014). However, examples were provided of how women are treated differently by some male colleagues, such as when there was aggressive behaviour in public meetings, there was an expectation that a woman in the chair can (and should) ‘calm things down’ because being a woman meant she had the right qualities for this.

However, the research identified that mainly women and men are reporting differences in their ward-level experience of being a councillor:

1. Casework disparities – types of cases
2. Workload disparities – ‘double burden’
3. Emotional work – ‘triple shift’

‘Gender balance’ describes having a woman on the ward team (one out of three councillors). There is a recognition that women get casework related to children but is this instead of other casework (parking, planning) or is it in addition to the same wide range as their male colleagues? The rules in use do not seem to permit discussions about gendered differences between councillors, whether in ward ‘teams’, or within their respective parties. So, residents have gendered expectations of their elected representatives, and councillors themselves also have gendered expectations of themselves and of their elected colleagues, especially in the ward ‘teams’.

Conclusions

One of the outcomes for women councillors appears to be a replication of the ‘double burden’ or even ‘triple shift’ (Duncombe and Marsden, 1995) found in other aspects of women’s work/life. This research study shows that in the councillor role, women are undertaking the core duties shared by all councillors (casework, committees, ward surgeries) but some of them are also dealing with additional responsibilities for child-related casework and specific ‘women’s issues’ (domestic violence was mentioned by more than one interviewee); and references were also made to the role women councillors play in relation to ‘emotion work’ (such as ‘calming down’ aggressive male behaviour in public meetings).

These gendered differences in councillors duties are justified as reflecting the expertise of different councillors, or their own interests, or even their personalities and where this is recognised as gender-different, it is still seen as positive because it reflects a ‘different but equal’ perspective. The
‘double burden’ or ‘triple shift’ this entails for women is as unidentified in these groups as it still often is in the personal sphere.

And where the formal institution of all-women shortlists have disrupted the previous fraternity of ward teams, some councillors have utilised the language of ‘gender balance’ to shore up this uneven gendering of ward-based labour.

Questions

Does feminist institutionalism provide a useful analysis of informal rules (rules in use) to understand the gendered mechanisms and gendered effects of ward based activity by councillors?

How does the agentic role of councillors (women and men) affect continuity and change in ‘doing ward politics’?

If ‘gender balance’ meant one man and two women in each ward team, would it change these institutional rules and would ward activity still be gendered?

References:


Lowndes, V. (2014) ‘How are things done around here? Uncovering institutional rules and their gendered effects’ Politics and Gender, 10 (4) pp.685-691


