Quotas and Descriptive Representation

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Abstract: The paper focuses on descriptive representation, which is a fundamental theoretical concept underpinning the introduction of gender quotas. The main question I consider in the paper is how to overcome the essentialism of descriptive representation. I consider the essentialist line of reasoning as unsustainable because it pays little attention to differences among women. I claim that a possible and desirable solution is based on the concept of gender as seriality by Iris Marion Young. Although women do not constitute a homogenous group, it is meaningful to talk about women as a group in some sense, specifically as a social collective. In this connection, I highlight the advantages of gender as seriality. Firstly and most importantly, it overcomes the essentialism of descriptive representation. Secondly, the concept of gender as seriality enables us to identify the barriers faced by women in politics. Finally, it highlights why quotas are legitimate tools that can be used to increase women’s political representation.

Keywords: gender, politics, representation, quotas, women.

Gender quotas have recently been introduced in a large number of countries around the world to improve women’s representation in politics (Dahlerup, 2006, Krook 2009). There has been discussion in political theory on whether quotas are a legitimate tool for increasing women’s political participation (Bacchi, 2006; Dahlerup, 1988). One of the theoretical concepts used in favor of quotas in this discussion is descriptive representation, which holds that political representatives

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1 This paper was written as part of a project, “Under-representation of women in politics and delegitimization of greater political participation of women in connection with female politicians’ failures”, conducted at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague funded by Specific Higher Education Research for the year 2015.

2 In autumn 2014 a bill was being drafted on introducing quotas in the Czech Republic. The aim of the bill is to change the way the candidate lists of political parties are drawn up. The bill is being put forward by the Ministry of Interior and Minister for Human Rights, Equal Opportunities and Legislation Jiří Dienstbier, who initiated the bill. The bill sets out the way in which ballot papers will be drawn up in order to reflect gender composition – the first names on the list should represent both sexes and then for every three subsequent names at least one of each sex must be represented. These legislative changes would apply to elections to the Chamber of Deputies and to regional elections. By way of illustration, currently, women constitute only 19.5 % of the Czech Chamber of Deputies. In the Senate there are even fewer women – 18.5 %. (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2014)
should reflect the characteristics of members of under-represented groups to counterbalance those who currently dominate political positions (Phillips, 1995; Pitkin, 1967, Rosenthal, 1995). However, descriptive representation is based on essentialist assumptions that are unsustainable since they ignore differences among women (Cornwall, & Goetz, 2005; Mansbridge, 1999). It is suggested, for example, that having a greater number of women in politics would bring a “feminine element” into politics. Arguments following this kind of logic essentialize women and are, I believe, questionable. Therefore I explore the ways in which we might overcome the essentialism of descriptive representation and yet not abandon the conceptualization of women as a group in some sense (Young, 1994, 2001). As a possible solution to this dilemma, I suggest the concept of gender as seriality developed by Iris Marion Young. The ambition of the paper is to contribute, not to the feminist theoretical discussion, but rather to the discussion on descriptive representation. The aim is to introduce anti-essentialist descriptive representation as a basis for defending gender quotas.

The paper is divided into three parts. In the first, I will focus on the false neutrality of universal citizenship, which stands in contrast to descriptive representation. After describing the main premises of descriptive representation, I will highlight the difficulties of this concept, specifically its questionable essentialism. In the second part, I will ask whether we can conceive of women as a homogenous group and whether there is such a thing as “women’s interests”. Finally I will attempt to answer the dilemma of descriptive representation – in what way can we go beyond simply looking for the common characteristics of all women and at the same time still conceptualize women as a group in some sense?

**False neutrality of universal citizenship**

There are two basic arguments concerning universal citizenship. Firstly, the ideal of universal citizenship presupposes certain fundamental commonalities among people and suppresses their possible divisions. Secondly, the universality in universal citizenship also means that laws and rules are the same for all and apply to all in the same way. Group differences are not taken into account, and universal takes precedence over particularity and difference. It is presupposed that all citizens have a
common general interest that transcends differences of group affiliation. From the point of view of universality, representative bodies should reflect general interest, whereas group interests would be considered illegitimate. As we can see, citizen homogeneity is required. As a consequence, specific group interests are suppressed in favor of general interest. Within the concept of universal citizenship, there is an evident fear that group differences would undermine commitment to the general interest (Young, 1989, pp. 252-255). Group differences are therefore made invisible.

The universal citizenship approach assumes the existence of impartial political representatives who act according to general interest (for example, Rousseau, see Young, 1989, p. 254). What does this mean for demands for more women in politics? Viewed from the perspective of general interest, there is no need for greater female political representation. It does not matter who the representatives are since they do not promote their own particular interests but make decisions in favor of general interest instead. How then can we explain the fact that certain groups are treated unequally, despite the fact that civil and political rights apply to all people? The concept of universal citizenship incorrectly assumes the impartiality of general interest. Supposedly neutral, general interest has been historically identified with historically privileged groups, and has merely been strengthening the interests of these privileged groups and further reproducing existing inequalities. General interest enables the dominant group to assert its perspective and experience as objective and not as one of many existing perspectives.

As we can observe, general interest is in fact the dominant’s group interest and it excludes those who do not share it. The required homogeneity suppresses group differences and groups originally excluded are evaluated on the basis of norms that were formulated by privileged groups. Groups that dominate political decision-making also set the agenda, political priorities and the way they are discussed (ibid., p. 253). It should be noted that the universal principles of citizenship were generally created by men. It was the feminist movement that challenged the assertion that everybody is treated equally regardless of their gender.

The fact remains that women, as well as other groups, have been ‘assimilated’ to a supra-category perceived as ‘neutral’, which has resulted in the fact that some dominant groups account for the large majority in the assemblies (i.e., white, upper-middle class men) (Mateo Diaz, 2005, p. 14, emphasis Mateo Diaz).
Descriptive representation and its essentialism

Criticism of universal citizenship led to the emergence of the theory of descriptive representation. Since the most significant contribution to discussions on descriptive representation is Hanna Pitkin’s analysis of the different concepts of representation (Pitkin, 1967), the premises of descriptive representation are explained with reference to Pitkin.

Descriptive representation highlights the composition of a legislative assembly, focusing on the characteristics of representatives and the key question of who the representatives are. It is supposed that the right of representation and the right of decision are not identical. Descriptive representation holds that the function of legislative assembly is linked to discussion and deliberation rather than acting for others and making policy (ibid., pp. 62-64). Advocates of descriptive representation require that the legislature should reflect the composition of society as a whole. The legislative assembly should consist of members of all social groups, that is, in proportion to their representation in society. When women represent other women simply by being present in political institutions, women are descriptively represented (Ford, 2011, p. 185). Why does it matter who the representatives are? According to Phillips,

past experience tells us that all male or mostly male assemblies have limited capacity for articulating either the interests or needs of women, and that trying to tie them down to pre-agreed programmes has had only limited effect. […] Representatives do have autonomy, which is why it matters who those representatives are (1995, p. 78, emphasis Phillips).

Descriptive representation does not only focus on visible characteristics such as gender or race, but also highlights shared experiences. Shared experience may lead to similar perceptions of problems and it is assumed that those who do not have a particular experience can never identify with the perspective of the group to be represented. It is expected that representatives will not only descriptively reflect the proportion of their group in society, but that they will also represent the interests of that group. Common characteristics of a representative and of those he or she represents (for example gender, race, class, location etc.) are supposed to imply
common preferences and interests (Mansbridge, 1999, p. 629). Can the interests of an under-represented group be expressed by someone who does not share the characteristics of the group? No, persons outside the group would be seen as illegitimate representatives of the group.

If we transform this claim to the question of the representation of women in politics, it would mean that only women can represent the specific interests of women (Mansbridge, 1999; Pitkin, 1967). For example, it is more likely that an agenda regarding the lack of kindergartens would be set by women politicians because in fact women are still primarily responsible for taking care of children. But this does not mean that male politicians cannot conceive of the topic of caring for preschool children and access to preschool care as important. Claiming that in reality the topic is closer to women does not mean denying that a male politician can set the agenda or support a legislative proposal in this particular field. Nevertheless, from the perspective of descriptive representation, men cannot be deemed to represent women.

The weak point of descriptive representation can be seen in its assumption that members of a given group hold a certain identity that all members of the group have in common without exception. It is supposed that nobody outside the group can have the same identity as members of the group. Characteristics and identities become the basis for representation. In other words, only women can represent women, only Roma people can represent Roma people and so on. Insisting that only women can represent women implies that there is some objective essence of womanness that all women share. This objective essence, descriptive representation holds, connects all women and as a result they have common interests.

“Essentialism involves assuming a single or essential trait, or nature, that binds every member of a descriptive group together, giving them common interests that, in the most extreme versions of the idea, transcend the interests that divide them” (Mansbridge, 1999, p. 637). An essentialist approach conceives of women as entities to which specific

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3 In contrast to descriptive representation, Hanna Pitkin (1967, pp. 209-240) advocates a different view of representation—“acting for”. This approach focuses on the representative act and not on the characteristics of representatives as descriptive representation does. It is assumed that a representative can represent certain thoughts and interests without necessarily being a member of a certain group. For example socialist thinking can be also promoted by someone who is not a member of the working class. In this conception of representation as “acting for”, women do not necessarily represent women’s interests best.

4 On the topic of how the unequal distribution of labor within the family impacts on inequalities between women and men in public life, see Susan Moller Okin’s book, *Justice, Gender, and The Family* (Okin, 1989).
characteristics are inseparably attached. Any woman represents all women regardless of class, ethnicity, sexuality or age. As we can observe, differences within the group are omitted by descriptive representation because all women are reduced to their objective essence found in their womaness. Since it neglects differences, the essentialism of descriptive representation becomes the subject of criticism. “The effort to locate particular social attributes that all women share is likely to leave out some persons called women or to distort their lives to fit the categories” (Young, 1994, p. 733).

I regard the essentialist line of reasoning described above as unsustainable. Still, the merits of descriptive representation are worth preserving and therefore ways out of the aforementioned problem need to be sought. One way would be to focus on the context in which descriptive representation is introduced, i.e. to identify the causes of the low proportion of certain descriptive groups in legislative assemblies. Globally, on average, women represent only 21.8 % of members of the legislature, despite the fact that they constitute half of the population (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2014).

How can we account for this fact? If we could provide evidence that dominant groups in the past intentionally excluded currently under-represented descriptive groups, it would imply that the under-represented group would be a good candidate for quota measure. Gender quotas\(^5\) are regarded as a response to requirements for steps to be taken that relatively quickly break through the historical dominance of men in political life.\(^6\) In the past men represented a dominant group whereas women were conceived of as subordinate. Women were not considered to deserve full citizenship rights, because of the biological distinction between women and men. For example, in the 19\(^{th}\) century it was believed that women were less intelligent than men because of their smaller brain (Renzetti, Curran, & Maier, 2012, p. 41). Men were linked to reason and the public realm, whereas women were identified with emotions and the private realm. This distinction meant that women were excluded from political life owing to their alleged lack of rationality (Young, 1989, p. 254).

Jane Mansbridge stresses that historical continuity should be considered.

\(^5\) When I refer to quotas in the paper, I mean quotas at the national parliamentary level.

\(^6\) Quotas are considered “fast track” remedies to past wrongs. A “fast track” approach anticipates that a gender balance in politics cannot be achieved by means of gradual improvement. In contrast to fast track discourse, there is also incremental track gender-balanced political representation, which has an optimistic, linear view of progress (Dahlerup, 2006, p. 8).
If a group has been in the past excluded by law from the vote … it seems likely that the social, political, and economic processes that allowed one group in the past legally to forbid the political participation of another may well have their sequel in the present, working through informal social, political, and economic structures rather than through the law (Mansbridge 1999, p. 639).

We could interpret Jane Mansbridge’s words as meaning that formal equalization does not necessarily mean we no longer encounter inequalities between men and women. Liberal feminism highlights the historical inertia of a cultural mechanism that maintains inequalities via the passive electoral right of women (Havelková, 2006, p. 27).

If there were no obstacles to women in politics, one might expect that the proportion of men and women in legislative assemblies would approximately correspond to that in society. “There might be some minor and innocent deviations, but any more distorted distribution [of women and men in political decision-making] is evidence of intentional or structural discrimination. In such contexts (that is, most contexts) women are being denied rights and opportunities that are currently available to men. There is a prima facie case for action” (Phillips, 1995, p. 63). The fact that women are in a minority in politics indicates that certain barriers are still present. The world of politics remains a male domain (Sapiro, 1981, p. 712).

Defending descriptive representation on the basis of the historical exclusion of women from political participation and referring to structural obstacles is more plausible than the questionable thesis claiming that there is an objective substance that unites all women without difference. The descriptive approach to representation is relevant in cases where one group, i.e. women, was excluded from political life in the past and even after formal barriers have been eliminated that group is still disadvantaged in reaching positions in political decision-making. Institutional mechanisms for greater political representation of women (such as quotas) based on the descriptive approach to representation should therefore be viewed as tools to moderate the impact of the barriers facing women in politics. In other words, gender quotas based on the descriptive approach to representation compensate the persistent

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7 Paradoxically, the biggest obstacle for women in politics comes from their own political parties placing them at the bottom of the ballot paper (Rakušanová, 2005).
disadvantage women have in political life and as such can be regarded as legitimate instruments for changing the long-term imbalance of men and women in politics. One can argue for quotas on the basis of structural inequalities using the concept of gender as seriality as will be discussed later.

With the elimination of structural barriers against women’s political participation, there will be no more need for quotas based on descriptive representation. Descriptive representation is thus conditional. As we have already observed, increasing the number of women in political decision-making requires a group representation mechanism that mitigates the consequences of inequalities between women and men in society. “More inclusion of and influence for currently under-represented social groups can help a society confront and find some remedies for structural social inequality” (Young, 2002, p. 141).

**Women as a homogenous group?**

There is one fundamental question that concerns efforts to increase the proportion of women in politics: Can we conceive of women as a group? Do women form a homogenous group that shares identical interests? Can we observe differences within the group, and if so, do they not undermine the conceptualization of women as a group? I will focus on all of these questions in the second part of the paper.

Before proceeding to these questions, the concept of group representation needs to be explored in more detail. One way to define group representation is in relation to the universal citizenship mentioned previously (Young, 1989). Instead of universal citizenship, Iris Marion Young suggests that group differentiated citizenship is the best way of achieving the inclusion and participation of under-represented groups (Young, 1989, p. 258). Proposals aiming to introduce group representation take the structural disadvantage of certain groups as their point of departure. According to this view, specific rights should be applied to groups that are systematically marginalized and under-represented in the long term. Therefore

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8 There are of course other ways to define group representation. For example Mercedes Mateo Diaz identifies three representational approaches – the individual approach, the group approach and the general interest approach. Within these approaches, she conceptualizes three elements – “for whom is the subject to be represented; who is the agent standing and acting; and what are the interests to be represented” (Mateo Diaz, 2005, p. 15, emphasis Mateo Diaz).
specific rights mitigating current disadvantage are also required to achieve greater representation of women in political life. As a way out of universal citizenship an institutional measure is needed. The main reason for the quota-backed specific representation of women is to compensate structural discrimination. To put it differently, the group representation argument strives for justice in the context of structural inequalities between men and women. There are two other arguments that are usually mentioned when discussing the specific representation of under-represented groups in general. The first one points out the benefit of inclusive political discussion and the second one advocates group representation on the basis of the right to self-government. At this point it is crucial to note that the ambition of group representation argument does not imply the replacement of party representation but rather its enrichment with another dimension. The greater political representation of women by no means questions the existence of the party system.

Another important question requires consideration: Is there such a thing as women’s common interests? Nowadays, perhaps nobody would claim that women are a totally homogenous group. For example, women’s opinions on the issue of abortions may differ. Furthermore, is the experience of white heterosexual middle-class women representative for all women? Certainly not. It is necessary to admit that characteristics such as class, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation etc. impact on and intersect with gender. There is an obvious danger stemming from an insistence on women’s unanimity, since the alleged unanimity does not eliminate existing differences. On the contrary, differences are suppressed in favor of so called homogeneity and one perspective is given priority over others. Looking for common characteristics and interests can as a result lead to the exclusion of some perspectives.

What implications do both the impossibility of identifying a homogenous group of women and the impossibility of identifying the interest of such a group have for political representation? The criticisms presented here suggest that differences among women need to be taken into consideration because we can find a wide range of different women’s experiences and opinions that stem from their different class status, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, etc. A plurality of experiences should be represented. As a consequence, just as we should reflect upon the over-representation of men in elected positions, it is equally important to consider which women manage

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9 Will Kymlicka claims that in multicultural societies there are groups that deserve self-government, namely national minorities (Kymlicka, 1995, p. 142).
to gain political office (Bacchi, 2006, p. 38). It might be that the vast majority of women politicians are white, upper-middle class and have no children. The life experiences of these women would not of course correspond to the life experiences of most women. It is crucial to reflect on these in-group differences since women of different classes or ethnic backgrounds should be represented in politics and share their perspectives in political reasoning.

A more proportional representation of women in political decision-making would without doubt reflect a wider range of women’s points of view. As a result we would be more sensitive to differences within women as a group. The internally contested perspectives, opinions and interests of women would be heard. This range of views would not be easily represented by only a few women (Mansbridge, 1999: 636). If the number of women in legislative assemblies were higher, it is more likely that different women’s perspectives would be represented than would be the case in predominantly male dominated legislatures. Although women might not have common interests – as the common objection goes—we can still claim that certain perspectives of women need to be represented. Importantly, Iris Marion Young adds that “social perspectives arise from broad social structures that position many people in similar ways whether they like it or not” (Young, 2002, p. 146). Perspective, unlike interest, is more open because it is a general orientation without particular conclusions being drawn. In large measure, it is women politicians who put issues on the agenda such as sexual harassment, violence against women, balancing work and family life, accessibility of preschool care, single mothers’ issues, etc. The approach of shared women’s perspectives also suggests that women can cooperate on these topics even though they come from different political parties. Nonetheless, this cooperation is not affected by their political orientation.

**Gender as seriality**

The dilemma we now face is the following: Can we base our descriptive-representationalist approach on an anti-essentialist principle without calling into

10 There are several consequences of women being in the minority in political decision-making: high visibility, tokenism, lack of knowledge about the informal power structure and the recruitment process, exclusion from informal networks, no considerations for family obligations, lack of legitimate authority, stereotyping and exposure to double standards (Dahlerup, 1988, p. 279).
question the conceptualization of women as a group in some sense? The answer is yes. The solution to the dilemma can be found in gender as seriality—a concept introduced by Iris Marion Young (1994). Gender as seriality is Iris Young’s response to feminist discussions about the difficulties and dangers of talking about women as a single group. She describes the dilemma for feminist theory as follows:

On the one hand, without some sense in which ‘woman’ is the name of a social collective, there is nothing specific to feminist politics. On the other hand, any effort to identify the attributes of that collective appears to undermine feminist politics by leaving out some women whom feminists ought to include (ibid., p. 714, emphasis Young).

Although the concept has been used in the context of feminist theoretical debate, I intend to shift gender as seriality from this discussion to a discussion about descriptive representation.

Iris Young advocates a position between the two aforementioned positions. On the one hand, Young agrees with the critique of the essentialization of gender. On the other hand, she disagrees with the liberal individualism that denies the reality of groups. The importance of conceptualizing women as a group in some sense becomes clear when contrasted to liberal individualism: “This individualist ideology, however, in fact obscures oppression. Without conceptualizing women as a group in some sense, it is not possible to conceptualize oppression as a systematic, structured, institutional process” (ibid., p. 718). As we can see, since women are structurally disadvantaged and oppressed, they need to be conceived of as a relevant group in some sense for political representation. Otherwise a woman’s disadvantage would be viewed merely as affecting the individual woman. For these pragmatic reasons, it is crucial to insist on the assertion that women are a group in some sense. In other words, identifying structural inequalities requires us to talk about disadvantage in a group sense. The main implication stemming from the differentiation between inequalities stemming either from individual obstacles or from structural disadvantages is of a normative political nature. Research into inequalities that is strictly based on a comparison of individuals does not enable us to make claims about social justice. On the contrary, research into inequalities based on the level of social groups allows us to claim that certain inequalities are unfair because it reveals important aspects of institutional relations and processes (Young, 2001, p. 2).
In order to resolve the dilemma of how to overcome questionable essentialism and at the same time not abandon the conceptualization of women as a group in some sense, I will now turn to Iris Marion Young’s reconceptualization of women as a social collectivity. But let us first explain the term gender as seriality. Here, gender is referred to as to a social series, a specific kind of social collectivity that Jean-Paul Sartre\textsuperscript{11} distinguishes from a group. The important distinction between a group and a series is depicted in the following way:

Members of the group mutually acknowledge that together they undertake a common project. In acknowledging oneself as a member of the group, an individual acknowledges oneself as oriented toward the same goals as the others. … Unlike a group, which forms around actively shared objectives, a series is a social collective whose members are unified passively by the objects around which their actions are oriented or by the objectified results of the material effects of the actions of the others (Young, 1994, pp. 723-724).

Gender as seriality enables us to perceive women as a social collective. Perceiving women as a social collective does not mean that all women have to share the common attributes of all women. Women are not defined on the basis of a specific interest, goal or political opinion, because there is no such thing as objective substance shared by all women. The social collective of women is viewed from the perspective of social position rather than from the perspective of identity. As Czech sociologist Hana Havelková claims, “women’s collective is relevant from the point of view of political representation because structural position is a political topic of its own” (Havelková, 2006, p. 29, emphasis Havelková). Seeing women as a collective in a certain position in society enables us to view women as being systematically disadvantaged as well as being defined in respect to existing relations with other members of society.

There is a unity to the series of women, but it is a passive unity, one that does not arise from the individuals called women but rather positions them through the material organization of social relations as enabled and constrained by the structural relations of … the sexual division of labor (Young, 1994, p. 733).

\textsuperscript{11} Iris Marion Young builds on the concept of seriality introduced by Jean-Paul Sartre. Although Young acknowledges that most of Sartre’s writing is sexist and his assumptions tend to derive from a masculine perspective, she believes his concept of seriality is useful for thinking about women as a collective. (Young, 1994, p. 723).
Needless to say, this approach overcomes the questionable essentialism of descriptive representation since it does not seek a common identity.

In addition to the two benefits of conceptualizing gender as seriality mentioned above, namely overcoming the essentialism of descriptive representation and the possibility of identifying the structural barriers, Iris Marion Young’s concept also provides us with a fundamental argument for using quotas as a legitimate tool. When we identify structural obstacles that make it difficult for women to get into political decision-making positions, we can then introduce quotas in order to mitigate them. Gender quotas would enable women to overcome existing barriers that prevent them from assuming positions as representatives. Objecting to quotas on the basis that they are unjust is irrelevant in the context of the structural, historically developed, inequalities between women and men.

**Conclusion**

There is a need to critically engage with the essentialist characteristic of particular interpretations of descriptive representation that disregards differences between women. Demands calling for descriptive representation should be based on the historical context of women’s exclusion from political life and the persisting structural barriers, rather than on an alleged common substance all women share without exception. Experiences of women differ according to their race, class, sexuality and age. As a consequence the conceptualization of women as a group sharing essential characteristics should be abandoned. Instead, exploration should be made of a different conceptualization of women, of women as a group in some sense. Gender as seriality, a concept developed by Iris Marion Young, overcomes the essentialism of descriptive representation without challenging women as a group in some sense. Although women’s common interests cannot be identified, it is crucial that we maintain the conceptualization of women as a social collective, since it enables us to discern structural inequalities between women and men. As a result gender quotas can be defended as a legitimate political instrument, because they mitigate the consequences of these inequalities.
References


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