Women’s agency and voice: a commentary on Karpowitz, Mendelberg, and Mattioli

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Karpowitz, Mendelberg, and Mattioli’s research [Politics, Groups, and Identities 3 (1): 149–177, doi:10.1080/21565503.2014.999804] on women’s limited participation in small discussion groups deserves close scrutiny. In School Board meetings and five-person experimental lab groups, especially those subject to majority rule, the researchers find that women speak less often than men, are interrupted more frequently, have less influence on group decisions, and are more likely than men to exercise compassionate decision-making. But there are bound to be exceptions to this conclusion and I consider the limits to Karpowitz and colleagues’ findings to better understand the conditions under which women’s agency comes to the fore. I focus, first, on the role played by group identities that can subvert prevailing norms of gendered behavior and, second, raise questions about the pervasiveness and magnitude of women’s different and more compassionate voice. I conclude by noting the rich research agenda revealed by Karpowitz and colleagues’ pioneering study.

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Karpowitz, Mendelberg, and Mattioli’s (2015) research on women’s participation in small discussion groups, described in this issue of Politics, Groups, and Identities, is groundbreaking, important, potentially disturbing, and worthy of careful scholarly attention and scrutiny. It fits with a vast compendium of psychological research on gender differences in non-verbal behavior, emergent leadership, and other aspects of social behavior (Dovidio et al. 1988; Eagly and Karau 1991; Hall, Carter, and Horgan 2000). In analysis of transcripts of School Board meetings and interactions among members of five-person experimental lab groups, the researchers find that women speak less often than men, are interrupted more frequently, and have less influence on group decisions. What is more, the decision rule adopted most often in small groups, majority rule, exacerbates this situation, silencing women when they are in the minority or a bare majority. Under majority rule, women only wield influence commensurate with their numbers in small group discussions if they form a supermajority (a rarity in political decision-making bodies). In contrast, a decision rule of unanimity gives greater voice to women when in the minority. Unanimity can be adopted by many small decision-making groups, but is less likely in the realm of politics, an inherently disputatious setting which typically relies on majority rule. In addition to the scholarly import of their work, Karpowitz and colleagues’ findings hold important

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practical implications for the quality and scope of deliberation in any number of civic decision-making bodies including school boards, community groups, and legal juries.

The researchers are not content to let it rest at that though. They up the ante by arguing that the absence of women’s voices within small groups is additionally troubling because women alter the nature of group deliberation. Specifically, they argue that women are more likely than men to focus on matters of care. This hypothesis is examined in analysis of speech from the small experimental groups in which members were asked to discuss the nature of government redistribution rules (linked to taxation and an economic safety net). The content and outcome of these group deliberations reveal that women are more likely than men to refer to family, children, the poor and the needy. The researchers find that such discussion topics are most common, and decisions more generous, when women are in the majority and deliberate under majority rule. In other words, under optimal circumstances, the outcome of women’s deliberation is different and more generous than that of men. This is an important second claim that heightens the consequences of women’s silence. If true, the absence of women in legislative, legal, citizen, and other decision-making bodies has broad implications for the generosity and need-based allocation of societal resources.

Both strands of evidence – that women are silenced and that they are more generous collectively than men in allocating societal resources – will rightfully reinvigorate political research on a range of matters. This research will not be without contention, however, and this is all to the good. Spirited debate over the subtle and not so subtle ways in which gender influences political outcomes is necessary and timely. Pressing questions for researchers of gender and politics focus centrally on how gender influences political decision-making among citizens and elites. Are there individual differences among women and men in gender-related attitudes that alter their support for a female candidate, or lead them to be more or less supportive of statements made by a female interlocutor? Do environmental factors – salient norms, covert sexist cues, a candidate’s political ads, prevailing gender stereotypes, gendered ideology – enhance or diminish the effects of gender on political outcomes? Have norms and stereotypes changed over time, and continue to change in response to women’s broadening roles, in ways that privilege women’s leadership (Eagly and Carli 2007)? And can women empower themselves even when in a minority, through a feminist ideology, for example, to combat covert male power and dominance? These are important questions that deserve our attention and will rightfully shift research questions away from whether gender matters to the circumstances and complexities under which it matters in contemporary politics. To further stimulate this vibrant research agenda, I raise several questions, caveats, and propose extensions to build on Karpowitz and colleagues’ impressive and important findings.

The power of group identities and ideology

My first concern centers on the degree to which groups and identity come into play in the small group decision-making bodies scrutinized by the researchers. They criticize past deliberation studies for having ignored group factors, specifically the status hierarchy that places men in a dominant position in relation to women. I would argue, however, that Karpowitz and colleagues also fail to fully examine groups and identities as powerful factors that shape and alter group dynamics. They implicitly view women and men in their small decision-making groups as atomized individuals, albeit individuals who have internalized norms of appropriate gender behavior, but do not regard them as collectives gendered or otherwise.

But groups are often more than a collection of disconnected individuals. For example, group members may form a cohesive unit with a common group identity. In this setting, the person who most embodies the group’s central qualities, the prototypic member, is an emergent leader (Turner
et al. 1987; Huddy 2001). Consider a group in the study consisting of five politically liberal individuals. The group may quickly discover their shared liberal principles, cohere as a collective, and identify the person in the ideological middle as the most typical member. This prototypic person could be either male or female and is likely to emerge as a group leader, influencing the group’s decisions, regardless of their other attributes including gender (Turner et al. 1987).

Other groups may be less cohesive or downright fractious, containing distinct, and possibly competing, subgroups which do not readily cooperate. Imagine a small group made up of three men and two women in which the men dominate the conversation. Now imagine the same group made up of three men and two feminist women who are irritated by constant male interruption and decide to call the men on their behavior. Gender is then a salient collective identity that splinters the five-person group into two subgroups. In this scenario, subtle norms (potentially outside conscious awareness) governing male behavior are disrupted by an explicit feminist ideology. In groups that deliberate over time, such subgroups may even strategize outside meeting time on how best to undermine the other side or even overturn the current power hierarchy. This may not be how things typically unfold in small deliberative bodies made up of strangers, given the many forces and distinctions that divide women, nor is it outside the realm of possibility.

Haslam and Reicher (2006) provide a highly visible account of this disruptive dynamic in the BBC re-enactment of the Stanford prison experiment. They randomly assigned subjects to two groups of five guards and 10 prisoners and told the guards that they were selected for their superior features. On day 5 of the experiment, a new prisoner—a senior trade union negotiator—was introduced into the setting. This altered the group dynamic, enhanced the prisoners’ sense of collective identity, and led them to view the guards as increasingly weak and the power structure as open to challenge. As this occurred, the guards’ sense of collective identity weakened and they exhibited heightened stress levels. Ultimately, the guards became demoralized and the prisoners revolted. This is obviously an extreme example, but it underscores how a prevailing power system can be subverted through the development of a collective identity among the less powerful. In a society that values egalitarian gender norms, the status quo may be subverted by simply drawing attention to covert male displays of power.

In a related point, deliberation groups may also contain cross-cutting cleavages that undermine hierarchical gender dynamics and minimize the power of gender. For example, a town board hearing on a new dense residential development may pit developers against irate parents who wish to protect their schools from overcrowding. Under these circumstances, women in the anti-development camp may feel compelled to defend their children and vocally oppose the developers. Women in this setting are no longer atomized individuals, but empowered members of a collective emboldened by a strong moral claim. In that sense, gender is a less salient identity than that of parenthood (Huddy 2013). Psychological research on stereotype threat demonstrates the ease with which gender can be replaced by ethnicity as a salient identity. Aronson et al. (1999) impaired the test performance of white males with high math ability by making their ethnicity salient through a comparison with Asian males (who are seen as high in math ability). No such impairment for men occurs in studies in which they are compared to women (although women’s performance is impaired in that context; Spencer, Steele, and Quinn 1999).

Karpowitz, Mendelberg, and Mattioli document clearly women’s greater silence and reduced influence in small group discussions, a finding that may be pervasive in all manner of small groups. But what if this finding is confined to groups comprised of strangers? Or strangers who discuss topics linked to politics on which men are seen to have an advantage? A woman may be more emboldened to speak up if she belongs to a group in which members come to know each other’s views through regular discussion and she finds herself at its modal position, or discovers that she has expertise relevant to the group’s deliberations. A woman may occupy
a position of power within her work organization and be accustomed to having her voice heard. Or a woman may speak up if the discussion topic is reframed away from matters of economic allocation to those on which women are believed to have greater expertise than men, such as the needs of children or the elderly. As a general rule, women may be relatively silent in mixed gender settings. But there are bound to be numerous exceptions to this rule, and it is worth documenting the limits to Karpowitz and colleagues’ findings if only to better understand the conditions under which women’s agency comes to the fore.

**Do women speak in a different voice?**

Of the evidence presented by the researchers, their finding that women speak in a distinct and different voice to men may be the most contentious. Their experimental groups arrive at more generous solutions when women are in a supermajority and deliberate under majority rule, or are in the minority and deliberate under unanimous rule. On average, groups with a supermajority of women extended the safety net by $6,600 to an average of $30,900. This is roughly the same amount allocated by groups containing one woman which make decisions under a unanimous decision rule. The researchers trace these more generous outcomes to women’s stronger support for, and emphasis on, issues linked to care, “the needs of families, children, and the poor,” in contrast to men’s greater concern about “taxes, prices, and other financial issues.”

Karpowitz and colleagues may overstate the case, however, in arguing that women are more uniformly supportive than men of a generous social welfare state. On average, women are more supportive than men of the social welfare system (Shapiro and Mahajan 1986; Howell and Day 2000; Schlesinger and Heldman 2001). But this difference is modest in size, averaging roughly three to four percentage points on typical poll questions. The gap is larger, somewhere between 10 and 15 percentage points, in support of Social Security, child care, and the homeless, and smaller on government aid to minorities, government-funded health insurance, government-guaranteed jobs, spending on the poor, food stamps, and programs targeted at the working poor (Clark and Clark 1993, 1996). Women typically report greater empathy than men on self-report measures and value benevolence (enhancing the welfare of those with whom one is in close contact) and universalism (protecting the welfare of all people) more highly than men. In contrast, men rank instrumental values (e.g., achievement, self-direction) more highly than do women (Feldman and Steenbergen 2001; Schwartz and Rubel 2005). But once again, these differences are small. And when it comes to actual behavior, gender differences evaporate. There is no gender difference in basic empathic ability or helping behaviors (Eagly and Crowley 1986; Ickes 2009).

Karpowitz and colleagues may have unwittingly capitalized on small population-based gender differences in values or social welfare opinions to arrive at groups of women and men who differ more starkly than the population as a whole. There is a small gap between women and men in support of social welfare policies that can be traced, in part, to gender differences in basic values, especially egalitarianism (Howell and Day 2000). These gender differences can be larger, however, among some subgroups of Americans than others. For example, the gap between men and women in Democratic partisanship and support for Democratic candidates is most pronounced among well-educated and professional men and women (Huddy, Cassese, and Lizotte 2008). It is difficult to know the extent to which the outcome of group deliberations depended on the makeup of group participants in this research.

If Karpowitz, Mendelberg, and Mattioli inadvertently overstate the difference in male and female voice, it leaves intact their basic finding of greater male dominance in small deliberation groups. The basic democratic right of voice does not depend on one’s viewpoint and women’s greater silence in small deliberation groups is troubling regardless of the outcome of group
deliberations. Future research should examine group outcomes more closely to square small differences in values and social welfare attitudes in the population as a whole with the large differences reported in the current research.

Conclusion

The practical significance of Karpowitz and colleagues’ findings is obvious. Their findings are also of great intellectual value and have the potential to spark a renaissance in gender and politics research. The researchers make apparent the virtue in moving away from a reliance on survey-based self-report measures toward the direct observation of male and female behavior. Such research is time-consuming and difficult. But it is also has a large payoff. There is more, much more that can be examined within this paradigm. The researchers place women and men in a situation that varies in two central respects – gender ratio and decision rule. But they do not systematically vary the task, underlying group structure, or the specific beliefs and attributes of group members. Their omissions lay bare the rich terrain yet to be explored.

References


