In this systematic treatment of women’s representation in Latin America, Schwindt-Bayer advances a distinctive conceptual and empirical approach to the study of women’s representation, one that focuses on its multidimensional nature. Traditionally, empirical scholars of women and representation tended to consider only one or two dimensions of women’s representation, most often the descriptive dimension or the link between descriptive and substantive representation. More recently, scholars of women and representation have called for an expansion of theoretical and empirical work to encompass critical actors and various locales of representation. This book represents a significant move forward for this broader research agenda, examining four distinct facets of representation—formal, descriptive, substantive and symbolic—as well as relations between these dimensions. The book is also ambitious empirically, combining region-wide, statistical analyses with country-specific analyses and comparisons of Argentina, Colombia and Costa Rica. This is a tremendous contribution, deepening our understanding of what it means to represent women, and the many different and related ways democratic representation may be executed.

Schwindt-Bayer considers each dimension of representation thoroughly and in novel ways. For example, she considers several ways in which substantive representation might be manifest, going beyond a simple analysis of policy outcomes. Examining political attitudes of male and female legislators, she finds that female representatives report that they place a higher priority on representing female constituents and women’s groups in society than do male representatives. In so doing, she argues, they draw on a shared experience of discrimination and respond to what they perceive as a special responsibility to represent women. Analyzing the policymaking process, Schwindt-Bayer goes beyond a narrower focus on policy adoption to explore bill sponsorship and cosponsorship as well as participation in committee and floor debates. She finds that women are more likely than men to individually sponsor and cosponsor “women’s issue bills” in Argentina, Colombia and Costa Rica. In Argentina and Colombia, women are more likely to defend women’s issue bills in floor debates as well. However, women appear to be slightly less active in areas perceived as masculine domains, such as agriculture or fiscal affairs. Turning to committee assignments and leadership appointments, she similarly finds that women dominate on women’s issue committees, and are less active in domains of male influence. Women and men report similar levels of interest in these areas, but have different rates of participation in these contexts. This sexual division of labor in the legislature, Schwindt-Bayer contends, is a sign that women legislators continue to be marginalized and shut out of leadership positions in the legislature. Nevertheless, even from this position of relative powerlessness, women legislators are able to achieve a significant degree of substantive representation for women.

Particularly interesting are the ways the book goes beyond previous studies to study new facets of representation for women in Latin America, and the relationships between these facets. The examination of women’s “home-style” or work that they do in their districts is one such instance. As Schwindt-Bayer notes, building relationships with constituents is a critical but underexamined aspect of gender and legislative behavior. And men and women are mostly similar in the degree to which they work in the district. Interestingly, the strongest difference that emerges here is that women representatives are more likely to focus on women and women’s organizations in their districts. Similarly innovative is the focus on symbolic representation, which Schwindt operationalizes as the feelings that women’s representatives evoke in the public.

Exploring the relationship between the four dimensions of representation, Schwindt-Bayer concludes that women’s increased presence in government has improved their substantive representation. Women’s descriptive, formal and substantive representation is associated with stronger trust in government and more satisfaction with democratic government, even given the general levels of perceived corruption and frustration with government across Latin America. This finding provides support for theories suggesting that descriptive representatives improve trust in government and democratic legitimacy.

Women’s formal representation, operationalized here as the formal rules that determine women’s
presence in government, such as quotas and PR, mediates the effect of descriptive representation on substantive representation, sometimes in contradictory ways. For example, some rules may result in greater presence for women but strengthen party structures that marginalize women and undermine substantive representation. Quotas, she finds, do improve women’s descriptive representation and overall do not add to women’s marginalization (adding fuel to an existing debate on whether quotas improve women’s representation). But overall, she concludes that the complexity of the relationship between such formal representation and descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation underlines the need for further research. Overall, one might characterize Schwindt-Bayer’s assessment of women’s representation in Latin America as constituting yet another “Incomplete Revolution” in women’s status.

Schwindt-Bayer highlights the multifaceted nature of political representation. At the same time, the nuanced treatment of the concept of “representation” inspires one to push further on the conceptualization of “women.” After all, gender is multidimensional too. Would these findings look the same if we disaggregated the analysis by race, ethnicity, sexuality and/or class? It might not: Research on the US has found that many of the phenomena examined here (voter attitudes, legislative behavior) vary significantly by race and race-sex groups. Similar phenomena may operate in the Latin American context. For example, there is some evidence suggesting that indigenous women in Bolivia have significantly different attitudes towards abortion than urban women of the dominant race; Similarly, in spite of measures introduced to increase the presence of both women and indigenous peoples, there is not a single indigenous woman in the legislature in Bolivia (Htun 2011).

Relatedly, we might expect different findings if we looked at different substantive areas of women’s representation. Are women representatives as effective on issues of abortion or violence against women as they are on questions of maternity leave? Extant research suggests significant difference in the dynamics across issues. These issue differences suggest that we might gain further insights by contextualizing the study of representation in the broader range of political forces contending in different national contexts and issues: What difference does it make if there is strong religious opposition to or feminist support for women’s issues and women themselves? What difference does the broader context of violence, militarization, and threats to national security make to the prioritization of women’s rights? Surely this is a key difference, for example, between Colombia and Costa Rica.

Schwindt-Bayer remarks, and emphasizes in the conclusion, that women have not attained what she calls “full representation.” This perfectly reasonable observation prompts the question: what is this ideal of full representation? Do the four dimensions (elaborated first by Pitkin) exhaust the ideal? The sophisticated treatment of representation in this book should push us to think more carefully about what the ideal of full representation for women looks like, and consider whether additional dimensions might be relevant. What broader processes of mobilization and empowerment are needed for full representation? Feminist scholars including Schwindt-Bayer emphasize the ways contextual, societal and institutional factors condition women’s (and men’s) identities, attitudes and behavior. This suggests that we need to incorporate examination of these broader conditions into our empirical analysis of representation. How do these broader conditions bear on women’s full representation? For example, over the past few years, the United Nations has documented the increasing use of sexual violence to keep women in the developing world from exercising their voting rights. Surely this is relevant for thinking about processes of democratic representation. Might this suggest that “full representation” requires full citizenship more generally, including conditions such as security of the person or freedom from violence? Does “full representation” for women require the elimination of race and class inequalities among women? These are just some of the questions we might think about as we move forward with the research agenda this book proposes.

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