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The Substantive Representation of Women and PR: Some Reflections on the Role of Surrogate Representation and Critical Mass

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Yesterday's suffragists and today's female activists who call for more women to be elected to parliament share some ideological grounds: They believe that women exercising the rights of citizenship, whether by voting or by being elected to office, can make a difference in politics. This reasoning was fed by the notion of critical mass, introduced in the political debates in 1988 by Drude Dahlerup. Elevated to lawlike status (or should I say dogma?), the concept of critical mass was quickly made the object of abusive interpretations, becoming synonymous with a relationship of cause and effect between presence and ideas (or between representation and responsiveness), and thus leading one to believe in the existence of a sisterhood among political women and a dialogue on their representational activities. Taking a leaf from the politicians' book, political scientists lost all prudence, abandoning themselves to blind generalizations with the powers that frame female politicians' words and acts. One of these forces is the electoral system. Although it plays a very important role in women's access to parliament, it was completely ignored by those who believe that in greater number, women will change politics.

This essay examines the relationships among descriptive representation, critical mass, and substantive representation, while taking into account the potential role of electoral systems in this equation. Although a multitude of studies have examined the impact of electoral systems on the percentage of women in politics, there is a conspicuous dearth of studies on their influence over the substantive representation of women.