

Women's Representational Role in Australia and Canada: The Impact of Political Context

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This article compares the perceptions of federally elected women in Australia and Canada regarding the political representation of women. More specifically, it aims to understand to what extent political rules (notably the electoral system) affect how the links between the descriptive and substantive representation of women are perceived. Through an examination of the results of interviews done with 44 female members of the 35th Parliament of Canada (1993–97) and 45 female MPs and senators in the 39th Parliament of Australia (1998–2001), the analysis shows that the electoral system (notably proportional representation) can influence elected women's perceptions of their role in ensuring the political representation of women. That being said, other variables can also help explain these perceptions, such as the party system, the parliamentary cycle and the unicameral or bicameral nature of parliament.

Introduction

The political representation of women has been the subject of much debate and many publications, approached both theoretically and empirically. One general observation to emerge from the empirical studies, which incidentally were conducted at different times and in different places, is that female politicians feel they have a responsibility to represent women. This 'gender-based mandate' as it were (Skjeie 1991) is manifested in different ways. For example, female legislators are more likely than their male counterparts to consider women as an important constituency group with specific concerns (Reingold 1992), to make feminist speeches on the floor or to sponsor and co-sponsor feminist legislation (Carroll 2001; Saint-Germain 1989; Tamerius 1995; Tremblay 1998; Vega and Firestone 1995). Female politicians are by and large open to the idea of a link between descriptive and substantive representation; their presence on the political scene

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