Critical Policy Studies

ISSN: 1946-0171 (Print) 1946-018X (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rcps20

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To cite this article: Zohreh Khoban (2023) Politics of Emancipation: A Feminist Defense of Randomly Selected Political Representatives, Critical Policy Studies, 17:4, 505-523, DOI: 10.1080/19460171.2022.2154235

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2022.2154235

Published online: 12 Dec 2022.

CRITICAL POLICY STUDIES
2023, VOL. 17, NO. 4, 505–523
https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2022.2154235

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Politics of Emancipation: A Feminist Defense of Randomly Selected Political Representatives

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ABSTRACT

The presence of women in elected assemblies has been argued to transform the political agenda so that it better addresses the needs and interests of women. In this article, I reflect on women's political representation by starting from democratic theories that point to the inadequacy of electoral democracy. I argue that, compared to including women in the political elite, dissolving the division of political labor between professional politicians and 'ordinary' citizens has a greater potential to challenge status quo gender relations. I suggest that political assemblies consisting of randomly selected citizens would better serve women's self-determination and emancipation for three reasons: 1) allotted representatives would be more willing and able than elected representatives to critique social norms and practices, 2) the idea of allotted representatives better supports the idea that knowledge is situated, and 3) it better accommodates the notion that political merit is a gendered, racialized and class-based concept.

KEYWORDS

Descriptive representation; women's representation; democratic innovations; sortition

1 Introduction

Over the last three decades there has been a rise in academic writings in support of the descriptive representation of (and quotas for) women in politics. One of the most influential theorists in the field is Anne Phillips, who in *The Politics of Presence* (1995) presents several strong arguments in favor of descriptive representation and gender quotas in elected assemblies. She maintains that the interest or needs argument is the most democratically relevant. According to this argument, changing the gender composition of elected assemblies is likely to transform the political agenda so that it better addresses the needs or interests of women, who have historically been excluded from most arenas of political and economic power, and who share experiences and interests that are distinct from those of men.

During the last two decades empirical studies have mapped and measured the effect of women's presence in elected assemblies. Studies on the causes and consequences of

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

electoral gender quotas have been among the fastest-growing subfields in gender and politics research (Krook 2010). The available evidence supports Phillips' interest argument: gender quotas have been found to affect policy and government spending priorities (e.g. Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Clayton and Zetterberg 2018). Female Members of Parliament (MPs) have also been shown to speak about issues related to women's interests significantly more than male MPs (Clayton, Josefsson, and Wang 2017).

Despite some progress, the increase in the number of women in elected assemblies – and the development of agendas and policies to obtain gender equality – has been slow. Scholars have therefore recently expressed concerns about political institutions' capacity to enhance equality, and called for a paradigm shift that entails re-imagining and re-engineering political institutions (Lovenduski 2019; Thompson et al. 2018). In a parallel process, the relationship between women's presence in politics and substantive political change has been problematized and further developed. For example, theorists have suggested a shift in focus from a 'critical mass' of women in politics to 'critical actors' (either men or women) who seek to substantively represent women (Childs and Krook 2009). Further, following the constructivist turn in political representation, it has been argued that when claiming to speak *for* women, representatives make claims *about* them, and therefore actively construct feminine subject positions (Squires 2008).

While several in-depth theories on women's representation have been developed, none has fundamentally challenged traditional legislative political institutions. In this paper I offer a feminist, theoretical, re-imagining of these institutions. Drawing on critical theory and radical conceptions of democracy that view citizen participation as key to a transformative and emancipatory democratic process, I argue that assemblies consisting of randomly selected citizens, which have the right to propose legislation, would better serve women's self-determination and emancipation. I therefore suggest that randomly selected assemblies of citizen representatives should replace or supplement elected assemblies.

The article proceeds as follows. First, I define feminism as constituting theories of gender equality that recognize men's structural domination over women. Second, I show that this type of feminism requires radical models of democracy that permit the politicization and contestation of the systems and norms of social life, and emphasize the political participation of 'ordinary' citizens in such processes. Third, I argue that feminists should support randomly selected political representatives as a way to *institutionalize* the political participation of 'ordinary' citizens because: a) allotted representatives would be more motivated and able than elected representatives to critique established social norms and practices, b) the notion of allotted representatives is more consistent with the idea that knowledge is situated, and c) the concept of allotted representatives better accommodates the idea that political merit is a gendered, racialized, and class-based concept. I conclude by highlighting that these arguments all suggest that the descriptive representation of allotted political assemblies has a greater potential than descriptively representative elected assemblies to identify the needs of the people and address structural injustices.

2 The limits of gender parity

There are many types of feminism. My argument against the division of political labor between politicians and 'ordinary' citizens speaks to feminist theories that have a 'domination–theoretical' view of gender (Allen 1998). While liberal feminist approaches conceptualize power as a *resource* that is unequally distributed between women and men, and should be redistributed in more equitable ways, the domination–theoretical view understands gender inequality as a relationship of domination in which men have unjust and illegitimate power *over* women. Feminists with different political and philosophical commitments (e.g. phenomenological, radical, socialist, intersectional, poststructuralist, and postcolonial feminists) have conceptualized this relationship in different ways, and analyzed its intersections with other forms of subordination such as racism, heterosexism, and class oppression (Allen 2021). All of these approaches recognize the structural and systemic features of women's subordination and seek to liberate women from these conditions – often via what is referred to as 'women's emancipation'.

Although the concept of emancipation refers to overcoming structures of oppression and domination, it is laden with different views on autonomy, agency, and progress (Lettow 2015). Inspired by Foucault, poststructuralist feminists have argued that power plays a role in the formation of subjectivity, and shapes a subject's wills and desires. This argument has highlighted the depth and complexity of power relations, and inspired discussions about the extent to which feminine subjects can gain autonomy and found something new (e.g. Benhabib et al. 1995). However, despite some differences of opinion, these theorists tend to agree that subjects who have been constituted by power relations are able to engage in practices of freedom, self-transformation, and experimentation, even if emancipating themselves from domination does not involve removing themselves from power relationships altogether (Allen 2015).

Discussing the gender composition of political assemblies can seem unproductive from a domination–theoretical approach. Such an issue could be argued to be more relevant to theories that focus on power asymmetries resulting from the unequal distribution of resources. However, the gender composition of political assemblies is not only interesting as a matter of redistributing resources. It is also important because increasing women's representation in such bodies has been predicted to bring about democratic and emancipatory social change. For instance, several analysts have asserted that women's presence in politics changes norms about their role in politics and society, and generates a political agenda that is more sensitive to women's needs and interests (Mansbridge 1999; Phillips 1995). Empirical studies indeed show that female politicians defend recommendations from feminist groups more than their male colleagues do (Lloren 2015). Their presence also increases expenditures on policy priorities expressed by women (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Clayton and Zetterberg 2018).

Today, women make up 26% of the world's parliaments – an increase of about 15 percentage points since 1995 (IPU 2022). This rise in the number of women politicians forms part of a persistent struggle for equal rights and the inclusion of women in public life. However, as the theorist Albena Azmanova (2016) has observed while looking back at the analyses and demands of second-wave feminists, the struggle against the 'relational domination' of unequal rights and exclusion has not been accompanied by a struggle

against 'systemic domination' – i.e. a questioning of the systemic roots of gender injustices. Women's presence in politics is no exception. According to Joni Lovenduski (2019), the proportion of women in senior decision-making positions grows very slowly; once they reach the upper echelons of an organization, women are required to play by the rules of the established order, which are biased in favor of men, and thus weaken their ability to press for change. Lovenduski advocates an institutional re-engineering that is more compatible with the principles of equality.

Recent theorization on women's representation has also highlighted and addressed the discrepancy between the presence of women in politics and the implementation of women-friendly agendas and policies. According to Sarah Childs and Mona Lena Krook (2006, 2009), simply electing more women to political office does not necessarily translate into the passage of legislation that is beneficial to women as a group. They propose shifting the focus to 'critical actors' – both male and female – who seek to substantively represent women. At the same time, the idea of accurately reflecting women's needs and interests has been nuanced. Following the constructivist turn in political representation, Judith Squires (2008) has argued that female politicians and femocrats engage in representative claim making by constructing the group that they claim to represent. Squires has therefore suggested complementing analyses of the substantive representation of women with an assessment of the 'constitutive representation of gender'.

3 Democracy and institutional innovation

Despite providing valuable insights, the theory development in the field of women's political representation has not yet inspired a re-imagination of the current formal political institutions that weaken women's (and men's) ability to challenge gender oppression and push for gender equality. Recent developments in democratic theory, in which feminist scholars have played a crucial role, suggest that such a re-imagination is based on redefining the very concept of democracy.

In recent decades, democratic theorists have increasingly argued that by being heavily organized around reconciling and aggregating individual interests, voting-centric models of democracy do not allow for the politicization, contestation and reformulation of identities, systems, and norms of social life (e.g. Barber 2003; Habermas 1996; Pateman 1970). Thus, although voting is a time efficient form of political participation and gives each participant an equal weight (Phillips 1992), these scholars argue that it alone does not enable individuals to control the social conditions of their lives.

The inadequacy of electoral democracy is of particular concern to critical theorists, who seek to promote human emancipation in circumstances of domination and oppression. In this literature, emancipation 'means for a subject to be able to break from any heteronomously predetermined role' (Hammond 2019, 788), while circumstances of domination and oppression usually refer to dominant discourses and ideologies, or structural economic forces (Dryzek 2000, 20–21). Critical theory explores how democracy can help emancipate individuals from such circumstances. Its adherents tend to support *radical* conceptions of democracy, which characterize it as an unfinished, continuous, and reflexive process (Dahlberg and Siapera 2007). Unlike aggregative, voting-centric, models of democracy, radical interpretations do not treat political rights and

interests as exogenous to the democratic process, but view democracy as a process through which power relations are analyzed and interests and preferences are formed – and transformed (e.g. Habermas 1996; Laclau and Mouffe 2014; Wolin 2018).

In order to enable a transformative and emancipatory democratic process, radical conceptions of democracy emphasize citizen participation as the central normative feature of democratic politics. While they usually advocate a vivid public sphere and collective mobilization, many radical democratic approaches also call for direct participation in the formal political sphere. The 'participatory' and 'deliberative' democratic branches of the radical democracy family are particularly skeptical of indirect models of democracy. Instead of seeking to reform political institutions and processes to increase turnout or improve the descriptive representation of elected representatives, for example, they seek to disrupt the hierarchy between political representatives and voters (see Cohen and Fung 2004). Thus, these theories provide a useful platform for thinking beyond voting-centric political institutions, such as elections, and offer guidance on the extensive and egalitarian type of restructuring of political institutions that feminists have called for.

Scholars who have advocated boosting women's descriptive representation in elected assemblies are not indifferent to the potential benefits of increasing citizen participation. For example, Anne Phillips has argued that 'the case of gender parity is at its strongest when it is associated with the larger dream' of a more participatory form of democracy, and that 'when the argument for gender parity is taken out of this context, it has to rely more heavily on arguments from political realism . . . [which] fall short on key concerns' (Phillips 1998, 237–238). She highlights women politicians' use of open forums and other types of consultations with women outside their party as an example of how gender parity among political representatives can revitalize democracy and change the balance between participation and representation (Phillips 1998). However, although such initiatives might be helpful, they remain highly vulnerable to the male-coded norms and rules of contemporary democratic systems (Lovenduski 2019; Piscopo 2019).

Various institutions, commonly referred to as democratic innovations, have been proposed as a way to break free of the voting-centric view of democracy and increase citizen participation, deliberation and influence in political decision-making (Elstub and Escobar 2019). Instead of requiring citizens to appoint political representatives through elections, some of these institutions use random or stratified random sampling to invite ordinary citizens to represent other citizens. While some scholars believe institutions comprised of citizen representatives should only have an educational, advisory, or vigilant role (e.g. Lafont 2019; Parkinson 2006), others argue that they should be given legislative powers (e.g. Buchstein and Hein 2009; Callenbach, Phillips, and Sutherland 2008; Gastil and Wright 2018; Guerrero 2014; Zakaras 2010). I devote the rest of this paper to making the case that feminists should support the latter idea.

4 A feminist defense of sortitionism

Governments and parliaments around the world are increasingly using the practice of sortition, which assigns citizens to political office by the drawing of lots (Sintomer 2018). Mini-publics such as randomly selected 'citizens' assemblies' are a well-known example. While those who accept the invitation to participate in these forums tend to be better educated, mostly male and older than the average population, these over-representations

are limited compared to the composition of participants in more traditional political activities (Jacquet 2017). Research on mini-publics suggests they have a positive impact on knowledge, internal and external efficacy, and civic engagement (for an overview, see Setälä and Smith 2018). However, they rarely influence decisions. Public authorities usually have the power to initiate them, set their agenda, and choose whether to adopt their recommendations (for an overview, see Elstub and Khoban forthcoming). A recent study demonstrates that political representatives, especially right-wing MPs, are largely opposed to the idea of granting decision-making powers to allotted political officials (Jacquet, Niessen, and Reuchamps 2022).

Previous studies of arguments for using allotted assemblies instead of, or as a supplement to, elected assemblies – an idea hereafter referred to as sortitionism – have primarily highlighted that sortition gives citizens equal access to political office and prevents corruption and the dominance of powerful interests (Burnheim 2006; Dowlen 2008; Goodwin 1992; Landemore 2020; Stone 2011). Proponents of sortition have also maintained that randomly selecting representatives is epistemically superior to representation through elections on the grounds that the former maximizes cognitive diversity, which improves the quality of deliberation among representatives and produces smarter results (Landemore 2013).

In recent years, sortitionism has gained increased support among proponents of radical democracy and social change. For instance, Yves Sintomer (2018) has made the case that empowered sortition processes are promising for the 'democratization of democracy', and Erik Olin Wright (2018) has advocated sortitionism as an anti-capitalist strategy. However, sortitionism's potential to help identify and counter structural and systemic injustices has not been fully investigated. In this section, I introduce and discuss three arguments for sortitionism that contribute to this literature from a feminist perspective.

4.1 Sortitionism as a window to social critique

If sortitionism is viewed as an effort to institutionalize citizen participation, and to facilitate emancipation from structural domination, the most immediate argument in favor of it from a feminist perspective relates to its potential to significantly disrupt the current institutional practices that prevent the identification and countering of gender-based relations of domination. At this point, one may question why new institutions are needed that facilitate the critique of current norms and practices, given that feminists already recognize and criticize the existing system of social structures and practices, in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women.

Feminists are certainly determined to resist and abolish gender oppression and achieve equality between the sexes. Yet although gender equality is the ultimate goal, its definition – and how to achieve it – are not fixed. In practice, feminism has developed in a lively manner, and involves the critique of racism in the women's movement and challenges to biological accounts of binary sex. In principle, the assumption that feminism is fixed and ready to be implemented contradicts the feminist goal of developing anti-authoritarian approaches to politics and organization. As Nancy Fraser (1989, 145) has argued in her discussion of social welfare systems, the interpretation of what various groups of women really need, and whose interpretations of women's needs should be

authoritative, is at the heart of feminist politics. According to this perspective, women's needs should be interpreted in an ongoing, inclusive, and dialogical manner.

The point that feminist critique of the status quo should be continuous and open is relatively uncontroversial. There is greater disagreement over identifying the institutional preconditions for critique. For instance, is it reasonable to expect criticism from within individual institutions, or would this simply reproduce the prevailing power relations? As discussed above, radical democrats regard 'ordinary' citizens' political participation as a key aspect of a democratic process that is equipped to criticize structural domination. However, they diverge over whether formal institutions for citizen participation can generate a thorough critique of the status quo. Some scholars have asserted that formal institutions for political participation are always introduced in accordance with certain power interests, which gives them inherent exclusion mechanisms with which to tame radical energy (e.g. Blaug 2002; Young 2001). This insight has motivated these scholars to highlight the importance of protests, disruption, and spontaneity.

All forms of institutionalized politics likely entail dangers of exclusion, and it is important to avoid treating democratic institutions as indisputable. However, this position does not contradict attempts to institutionalize more participatory forms of governance in the formal political arena. Lowering the participation threshold via sortitionism should help achieve inclusive and critical decision-making, even if we assume that full inclusion can never be realized, because sortitionism allows new actors to regularly enter the political decision-making arena with no barriers to entry. Although there are likely to be barriers to equal voice and influence among participants (Young 2000; Cornwall and Goetz 2005), these can be reduced with the help of institutional design (Karpowitz, Mendelberg, and Shaker 2012; Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2014; Harris et al. 2021). And although moments of protest and rupture are cherished, long-term strategies are needed to organize power and influence along radical democratic lines (Muldoon 2021; Vick 2015).

Assuming that more inclusive decision-making, and better prerequisites for social critique, are a) desirable and b) possible to institutionalize, sortitionism is an attractive way to enhance social critique for two reasons. First, allotted citizens should be more *motivated* than elected representatives to explore and imagine politics beyond the status quo. This is because the lottery-based selection process would significantly reduce the presence of individuals who benefit from the status quo, and who therefore have the time, resources, and social status to run for political office. As Erik Olin Wright (2018, 334) has argued, allotted representatives 'will be more open to reform and more sceptical of self-serving arguments for inequality preferred by elites'. This should be especially likely if they have the opportunity to access sound information and deliberate together. Prior research on deliberative mini-publics indicates that citizen deliberation serves as a buffer against elite manipulation, and allows individuals to consider issues across a wider range of considerations on more equal terms (Niemeyer 2011).

Allotted representatives should also be more keen to focus on social reform because no vote- or office-seeking activities would overshadow disputes over political content. Unlike their elected counterparts, allotted representatives would not need to worry about campaign finance, whether voters consider them to be 'likeable', or self-promotion. These non-ideological aspects of electoral competition not only divert

representatives' attention from enacting social change; they also disproportionately discourage women from seeking political office in the first place (Lawless and Fox 2010).

Second, sortitionism should enhance the influence of critical representatives. Critical allotted citizens should be more *able* than critical elected representatives to enforce social change. This is because sortitionism offers an escape from the traditional male-coded norms and rules that dominate political institutions, to which critical women (and men) are forced to adjust in order to make progress, but which weaken their ability to press for change (Lovenduski 2019). The absence of political parties and the relatively high turnover of representatives in allotted assemblies increase the chances of breaking with old norms and practices. The UK House of Commons illustrates the difficulty of challenging such practices: the low turnover rate ensures that new MPs must conform to a culture of traditional masculinity in order to be effective (Lovenduski 2005).

In summary, sortitionism has the potential to install *and* unlock windows to social critique by making representatives more interested in and capable of implementing egalitarian policies. Unlike institutions that apply sortition but merely *consult* with citizens, political assemblies that grant ordinary citizens *legislative powers* facilitate both opinion formation and decision-making. Sortitionism thus paves the way to creating 'strong publics' (Fraser 1990) that can translate opinion and will formation into authoritative decision-making.

4.1.1 The authority, equality, and accountability of allotted assemblies

Those who support granting allotted assemblies legislative powers tend to recommend either *strong sortitionism* (allotted assemblies are superior to or replace elected assemblies) or *weak sortitionism* (allotted assemblies are balanced with or subordinate to elected assemblies) (Lucardie 2014). In addition, some argue that random selection makes its strongest contribution to democratic politics when citizens are selected to guard the integrity of the political system – not to make policy or enact laws (Delannoi, Dowlen, and Stone 2013). Yet from a radical democratic and feminist perspective, allotted assemblies – whether they replace or share power with elected assemblies – must be able to *initiate* laws. Otherwise they would have a very limited ability to critique prevailing norms and practices and to explore new ones.

The idea to grant randomly selected assemblies law-initiating powers might raise concerns about their democratic legitimacy, especially as it relates to democratic equality and accountability. Such skepticism is understandable given the current status of sortition. While sortition has historically been associated with democracy, this connection has been lost in the modern era, both in theory and practice (Manin 1997). Voting is now considered the gold standard democratic method. However, several researchers have recently emphasized the democratic credentials of sortition contra elections.

According to Peter Stone (2016), voting and sortition rest upon comparable, but different, understandings of democratic equality. The former uphold equality through an *equal right to vote* for political representatives and the latter via an *equal probability of holding office*. Stone asserts that random selection is an appropriate method for distributing public office if citizens have equal claims to that office, while elections make sense if they do not. Consequently, opponents of democratic elitism should prefer the notion of equality on which random selection is based. Hélène Landemore argues that random

selection, unlike elections, does not recognize distinctions between citizens and thereby strictly equalizes access to power (Landemore 2020, 90).

But what about accountability? Proponents of elections often claim that elected politicians are accountable to their constituencies, while randomly selected citizens are not. Yet advocates of sortition maintain that this lack of constituent accountability gives randomly selected office-holders greater freedom to serve the population as a whole (Sintomer 2018; Warren 2008). Empirical evidence of mini-publics show that this type of accountability is strong among randomly selected citizens (Beauvais and Warren 2019).

In addition, random selection and rotation are thought to be accountability mechanisms in and of themselves. As Landemore explains (2020, 100 f.), randomly selected bodies in Athenian democracy prevented decision-makers from accepting bribes and accession to power through donations. The periodic and frequent rotation of these bodies also made it difficult to build quid pro quo arrangements over time. In her discussion of the accountability of non-elected representatives, Landemore also highlights a trade-off between 'democraticity' and accountability. She argues that although accountability plays an important role in institutional design, it is an 'extrinsic feature of democracy' that 'should not be fetishized or ranked above more fundamental democratic values' such as inclusiveness and equality (Landemore 2020, 104).

Although sortition provides alternative mechanisms of equality and accountability, it presents three challenges from a radical democratic point of view. First, the lack of elections and constituent accountability might suppress political contestation and promote the depoliticization of issues (Malkopoulou 2015), which may continue or even accelerate the journey toward a 'post-democratic society' (Crouch 2004). This is a serious risk, even if we assume that depoliticization would worsen under the current political system. It points to democratic innovations' limited ability to generate emancipatory critique in isolation, and highlights the importance of their connections to civil society (Hendriks 2006) and the existence of a political culture characterized by genuinely critical attitudes (Böker 2017).

A second challenge is that while sortition can function as an accountability mechanism, for example by preventing the accession to power through donations, allotted assemblies might be more prone to bureaucratic capture due to their relatively high turnover rate and low knowledge of particular policy areas (Landa and Pevnick 2021). Further, allotted representatives might be vulnerable to the influence of wealthy and well-organized interest groups in the same way as elected representatives, but without the defenses that membership of a political party can offer, and without having to worry about being reelected (Landa and Pevnick 2021; Owen and Smith 2018). Thus, they might be unwilling and unable to set a counterhegemonic agenda. While these are relevant concerns, they have not been empirically confirmed. So far, there is no evidence to suggest that randomly selected citizens are especially vulnerable to external pressures (Stone and Malkopoulou 2022). This is indeed a risk if they gain more political power. Bureaucratic and elite capture is therefore an important issue to address when planning the institutional design of allotted assemblies with law-initiating powers.

Finally, allotted assemblies are likely to have difficulties ensuring the presence of a diverse group of citizens. Research on deliberative mini-publics shows that invitees decline to participate for a variety of reasons including domestic responsibilities, low internal political efficacy, a desire to avoid having to attend public meetings, and political

alienation (Jacquet 2017). These reasons for nonparticipation are likely to be more common among women and other marginalized groups. In addition, there is the risk that the engagement of some under-represented groups might prevent the participation of others. For example, privileged women might be enabled to participate by the domestic labor of poorer and ethnic minority women, which would hinder the participation of the latter group (Celis and Childs 2019, see also Phillips 1992). Institutional design choices and benefits such as child care, a generous wage, and the ability to return to one's job at the end of the mandate could help reduce self-selection biases (Vandamme and Verret-Hamelin 2017). Such measures would neither eliminate unequal participation nor target the social structures that produce it. However, if an allotted assembly is more inclusive than an elected assembly, it should be more driven to address those social structures. After all, the inclusion of the currently disadvantaged is often a prerequisite for more equitable social policies (cf. Phillips 1999, 31).

4.2 Knowledge is situated

In addition to the argument that allotted assemblies are more likely than elected representatives to formulate critique and enforce radical policies – an argument that should be of interest to all movements that seek far-reaching, democratic, social transformation – there are two additional arguments in favor of legislature by lot that should be persuasive from a feminist point of view. The first relates to feminist theories of situated knowledge, while the second connects to the democratic and feminist critique of meritocracy.

A central concept of feminist epistemology is that knowledge reflects the perspectives of the knower. Feminist standpoint theory, feminist post-modernism, and feminist empiricism take different approaches to this issue (Harding 1986). However, scholars generally agree that the *social location* of the knower – which includes their ascribed social identities such as gender, race, and class, and the social relations and roles affected by these identities – affect what and how they know (Anderson 2000). In addition, feminist epistemologists often emphasize the transformative potential of situated knowledge. Standpoint feminists argue that the perspectives of subordinated groups can provide an epistemic advantage regarding topics related to their subordination (Collins 2000; Harding 1991; Hartsock 1997), while the post-modernist approach advocates a more mobile positioning to better understand the practices of domination (Haraway 1988).

Feminist epistemologists usually refrain from analyzing perspectives or standpoints via an individualist lens. Standpoint feminists are particularly careful to point out that a standpoint is a collective process of political struggle, mediated through a politicized consciousness (Harding 1992; Hartsock 2004). Nevertheless, they emphasize marginalized lives and experiences as the starting point for asking new, critical, questions about the social order (Harding 1992; Smith 1990). Several feminist standpoint theorists, especially black women scholars, invoke their own lived experiences in their work (Collins 2000; hooks 2000; Smith 2004).

The idea that knowledge is socially situated constitutes a strong argument to support the random selection of citizens to legislative assemblies. This is mainly because allotted assemblies pick representatives straight out of life – which should increase the use of their

personal lives and experiences in two different ways. First, the fact that individuals in different social positions qualify, and that there are no expectations of any particular knowledge or experience, should encourage those selected to reflect on their personal knowledge and experiences rather refer to an 'objective' and detached worldview. Second, compared to professional politicians, randomly chosen representatives should be less familiar with and adapted to 'universal' political stories and perspectives, and therefore are likely to be more compelled to start thinking from their personal experiences. Thus, they should be more likely than elected politicians to rely on their 'lived experiences as a criterion of meaning' (Collins 2000, 257).

The experiences of allotted women (and men) will not necessarily give rise to new perspectives or standpoints. As mentioned above, the emergence of new standpoints presupposes the existence of collective consciousness and struggle. However, an increased reference to lived experiences should render feminist and other critical lenses more attractive for interpreting political issues. This is because the lived experiences of women and other marginalized groups tend to give rise to questions that are not posed from hegemonic perspectives, and for which a satisfactory answer requires feminist and/or other unconventional starting points for enquiry (e.g. Collins 2000; Hartsock 2004). Thus, frequent references to lived experiences in a political assembly should help avoid falling into what Patricia Hill Collins has described as a conventional and objectifying type of meaning making (Collins 2000, 255–256). The point is not that elected men and women cannot produce feminist analyses, but that randomly selected representatives should be more likely to bring attention to such analyses.

In addition to invoking feminist and other unconventional points of enquiry, sortitionism supports two important assumptions in the literature on situated knowledge. The first is that subjects of knowledge are multiple, heterogeneous, and contradictory or incoherent. Thus, there is no typical or essential woman's life to start from (Harding 1992). Due to the absence of specific requirements for entry, or specific ideas about diversity, randomly selected assemblies should have a better chance than elected assemblies of accounting for the heterogeneity of women's lives and experiences, and thereby drawing attention to a wider range of perspectives and political struggles.

In a second assumption, feminist epistemologists emphasize a continuous reexamination and deconstruction of perspectives and standpoints, including those of marginalized groups (Haraway 1988). Randomly selected assemblies should enable such a process by being independent of the electoral support of established social groups. This independence, combined with opportunities for deliberation, should support interpretative and exploratory aspects of opinion formation (Khoban 2021). In other words, allotted assemblies should encourage 'those points of views, which can never been known in advance, that promise something quite extraordinary, that is, knowledge potent for constructing worlds less organized by axes of domination' (Haraway 1988, 585).

Prior research has put forward the argument that randomly selecting political representatives increases the epistemic quality of democratic decision-making. Landemore (2013) has contended that deliberative assemblies of representatives benefit from random selection because it increases the diversity of ways of seeing and interpreting the world and thereby enhances group intelligence. Compared to this argument, a defense of random selection that is based on the idea that knowledge is situated should be more appealing to feminists because such a defense does not merely claim that a diversity of

worldviews generates smarter decisions. Rather, it first acknowledges that dominant conceptions and practices of knowledge attribution, acquisition, and justification disadvantage women and other subordinated groups. It then stresses that a diverse group of individuals, who rely on their various lived experiences, should be more likely to challenge dominant accounts of the world and the power relations they reproduce.

4.3 Merit is male

In discussions of selecting citizens for political office via lottery, the most common worry is their lack of competence. While there is little empirical research in this area, researchers have observed that citizens who participate in randomly selected mini-publics are willing and able to reach sound judgments and recommendations on complex issues (Setälä and Smith 2018). Elected officials have also been found not to differ systematically from everyday citizens in how they use information to make political choices (Griffin 2013). Nevertheless, concerns remain that allotted representatives will not be intelligent, educated, effective, or experienced enough to make good policy.

This concern is echoed in the literature on women's descriptive representation, which has argued that law-making 'requires considerable talent and acquired skill', and that 'the costs of replacing current elected assemblies with assemblies chosen simply by random selection from the population overwhelm the current benefits' (Mansbridge 1999, 632). Similar arguments have raised controversies about attempts to achieve descriptive representation through gender quotas. Scholars have therefore explored whether such quotas limit or enhance the competence of elected representatives, and found a positive effect on representatives' level of education and previous income (Baltrunaite et al. 2014; Besley et al. 2017).

Although empirical analysis can be an effective way to resolve this controversy, demanding and measuring the competence of political representatives is problematic from both democratic and feminist perspectives. This is because doing so a) legitimizes the idea of meritocracy, which undermines the idea of democracy and b) disregards the fact that the concept of merit is constructed based on existing power structures.

As mentioned above, radical models of democracy regard citizen participation as a central feature of democracy, and seek to disrupt the division of political labor between professional politicians and 'ordinary' citizens. The problem with meritocracy is that it is a system in which individuals qualify for a task based on distinctive achievements. Hence, by definition it disqualifies and excludes some individuals. As Jo Littler has argued:

> [Meritocracy] endorses a competitive, linear, hierarchical system in which by definition certain people must be left behind. The top cannot exist without the bottom. Not everyone can 'rise'. Unrealised talent is therefore both the necessary and structural condition of its existence (Littler 2017, 3).

The inherently exclusionary tendency of meritocracy is viable for an elitist idea of democracy, according to which citizens choose and replace their rulers. However, it is not compatible with the idea that common people are equally qualified to govern themselves. As Hannah Arendt asserted, 'meritocracy contradicts the principle of equality, of an equalitarian democracy, no less than any other oligarchy' (Arendt 1961, 177). Or, in the words of Jacques Rancière, the power of the people 'is simply the power

peculiar to those who have no more entitlements to govern than to submit . . ..[and] the power of the best cannot ultimately be legitimated except via the power of equals' (Rancière 2014, 46–47).

Who, then, does meritocracy exclude? The answer depends on the idea of merit, which is related to the power dynamics of its context (Littler 2017, 155–156). Therefore, gender, ethnicity, and class are very likely to be closely linked to the perception of merit in most prevailing contexts. A dominant alternative view frames merit as having nothing to do with gender, race, or class. However, scholars in various disciplines have repeatedly shown that this construction privileges wealthy white men (e.g. Colley 2004; Heward 1994; Murray 2015; Thornton 2007, 2013) and can be traced back to 'legacies of Enlightenment rationality that positioned white masculinity as the site of rational logic and merit' (Littler 2017, 166). Nirmal Puwar has highlighted that the positioning of white masculinity as the center of logic and merit means that non-whites and women are evaluated from a point of reference that has developed in opposition to them. While recognizing the gradual increase in the number of women and non-whites who enter parliaments, the judiciary, the civil service, and academia, Puwar observes that they are measured against 'an undeclared white masculine body underlying the universal construction of the enlightenment "individual"' (Puwar 2004, 141).

Empirical studies of the merits of political representatives usually measure competence based on, for example, level of education, previous income, and administrative experience (Baltrunaite et al. 2014; Besley et al. 2017; Galasso and Nannicini 2011). There is no doubt that such criteria are preferable to selection based on old boys' networks and 'homosocial capital', which maintain men's political dominance (Bjarnegård 2013). Further, some women and individuals from ethnic minority groups and less affluent circumstances will likely be able to match or even outperform wealthy white men on these parameters. However, from a structural perspective, these qualifications are more easily accessible for the latter group. This means that assessments of competence in political assemblies, and hence support for the meritocratic idea that assemblies are better off if this competence is rewarded, legitimizes governance by wealthy white men. Thus, from a feminist perspective, meritocracy is objectionable because it promises advancement based on merit rather than sex, ethnicity, or money, but is committed to a notion of hierarchy that discriminates against individuals on these very grounds (Littler 2017; Williams 1958).

A radical democratic and feminist idea of political decision-making does not require anyone to climb any ladder. The ladder, the typical symbol of meritocracy, must instead be turned on its side. Randomly selecting citizens for legislative assemblies is a promising way to do so. This approach allows citizens to take part in political decision-making without requiring any specific qualifications. It thus takes seriously the assumption of an 'equality of intelligence' in political actions (Rancière 1991) – which by *presupposing* equality stops hierarchical mechanisms 'in their tracks' (Rancière 1999, 17). This assumption of equal intelligence is also helpful for democrats and feminists because it does not refer to the capacity to lead, build coalitions of support, or any other conceptualization of political competence that pushes politics into the spheres of management and bureaucratic administration. The assumption of equal intelligence instead insists on an equal political capacity in a more democratic sense: the equal ability to discuss our situations and create meaningful lives with one another (May, 2009). From this assumption it

follows that a political assembly is sufficiently politically competent because it is descriptively representative. Its competence is secured by including different experiences of individuals' shared lives. Any additional criterion of political competence risks reproducing and extending structural injustices, rather than allowing for a democratic need interpretation that is equipped to challenge them.

5 Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that randomly selecting ordinary citizens as members of political assemblies is desirable from a feminist perspective, and that these allotted assemblies should replace or balance elected assemblies because a) allotted representatives are more likely than elected representatives to critique social norms and practices, b) the notion of allotted representatives takes seriously the idea that knowledge is situated, and c) the concept of allotted representatives better accommodates the idea that meritocracy is a hierarchical system characterized by the power structures of its context.

In line with previous research on the under-representation of women and ethnic minorities in politics, the arguments in this paper highlight the importance of descriptive representation and a 'politics of presence' (Phillips 1995). However, by questioning the voting-centric idea of democracy, and instead viewing democracy as a process that gives ordinary people the opportunity to identify and challenge structural oppression and domination, I advocate a more radical idea of descriptive representation – which avoids a division of political labor between common people and professional politicians. This notion of descriptive representation highlights the inadequacy of affirmative action policies such as electoral gender quotas, which increase the presence of women in politics but uphold a division of political labor between professional politicians and the rest of the population.

As the discussion in this paper has suggested, allotted assemblies are not flawless. But compared to a descriptively representative political elite, the descriptive representation of randomly selected assemblies is more likely to challenge structural injustices and promote emancipatory politics.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers, participants at the Uppsala Gender and Politics seminar, the Politics seminar at Örebro University, and the panel Gender Equality in Political Representation Revisited at the ECPR General Conference 2020 for many helpful comments. Special thanks to Olle Folke, Markus Holdo, Malin Holm, Cecilia Josefsson, Martin Karlsson, Karin Leijon, Marina Muñoz Puig, Pär Zetterberg and Joachim Åström. I am also thankful to Kelley Friel for careful copy-editing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Vetenskapsrådet [2018-00703].

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