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Abstract

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Keywords

Gender, sex, institutions

Equality among participants is often seen as a requirement for legitimate deliberation. Ideally, one's propensity to participate during a deliberative forum and the regard with which others view their contributions ought not hinge on social characteristics like gender, race, or education level. In *The Silent Sex*, Christopher F. Karpowitz and Tali Mendelberg explore the extent to which this ideal is realized with regard to gender's impact on deliberative participation and influence. To study this, though, requires a deep understanding of the actual contents and dynamics of deliberation, which is often absent in this type of research. Countless examples have shown citizen deliberation to be a powerful experience, capable of exerting a positive influence on the nature of decision-making, those who participate, and the decision itself. However, what actually happens during citizen deliberation is still very much a mystery. A common research strategy is to employ pre and post deliberation surveys and attribute any differences to the deliberation that happened in between. By contrast, Karpowitz and Mendelberg meticulously peer inside the black box of deliberation and spend the majority of their time focusing on citizen behavior *during* deliberation as opposed to what is said before or after.

Inside the black box of deliberation, the authors find particularly troubling evidence with regard to gender equality in deliberative bodies. Put simply, women speak significantly less than men do and what they do say carries less weight. This finding presents a puzzle in that it is not rooted in a lack of sophistication (women have more education than men) or a lack of civic-mindedness (women vote in greater numbers than men). Why then do women speak less than men do in deliberative bodies? The authors relentlessly pursue this question, leaving no stone unturned. With a strong theoretical grounding, the authors use experimental data to pin down the mechanisms responsible for the gender gap in deliberative participation. This experimental evidence is supplemented with a study of minutes from 87 different school board meetings across 20 states to ensure that the mechanisms identified in a highly controlled artificial setting hold in the real world of deliberative politics.

Even among those who are deeply concerned with gender equality in representation, the easy answer is to focus on descriptive representation. As the number of women in various deliberative bodies increases, so too will their speech and influence within that body. A real achievement of this book is to add nuance to that overly simplistic line of reasoning. The authors show that numbers alone won't do much to address the puzzle at hand. Rather, it is in the interaction of numbers and institutional rules that we gain real traction on this problem. The number of women in a discussion group combined with the group's decision rule helps to explain when women are more or less involved in group deliberations.

Specifically, women participate most and carry the most influence in deliberative bodies that employ majority rule (when women are in the majority) and in deliberative bodies that employ unanimous rule (when women are few in number). At the same time, women are at the biggest disadvantage, in terms of speaking, in deliberative bodies that employ unanimous rule (when women are great in number) and in situations that employ majority rule (when women are few in number). Through four empirical chapters, the authors show how the aforementioned configurations of gender composition and decision rule affect speaking time, the content of discussion, the group's decision, and the patterns of interaction between men and women during deliberation. The substantive significance of these findings is tremendous—not only do women tend to speak less than men during deliberation, but the actual content of discussion and the decisions that result could differ depending on the group's gender composition and decision rule. Furthermore, the authors find that women are at a serious disadvantage in deliberative bodies where there are few women and majority rule is employed. Unfortunately, this is the most common configuration for decision-making bodies, with the U.S. Congress being the most prominent example. This leads one to question how well women are being represented politically and how different the tenor and outcomes of political discussion might be if institutional configurations were different.

One of the many admirable things about this book is the care with which the authors address alternate explanations and potential criticisms. In spite of this, one insufficiently addressed shortcoming is how the authors use their findings to inform prescriptions aimed at addressing gender inequality in deliberation. They state, “The results provide some simple guidelines for promoting gender equality of participation and influence. When women are outnumbered by men, use unanimous rule. When women are a large majority, use majority rule” (p. 141). The implication here is that deliberative bodies should alternate between decision rules depending on the gender composition of the group. This sort of back and forth change seems unlikely not to mention the dearth of decision-making bodies that employ unanimous rule. Short of this, this book's findings and the prescriptions it offers seem to suggest that a woman's only hope in having equal voice is luck. In order to have equal voice and influence, one must hope that the configuration of numbers and rules is just right. Otherwise, you're out of luck. The authors powerfully demonstrate that a group's gender composition and decision rule matters. However, is there a problem behind the problem? The authors devote the vast majority of their energy to institutional explanations of women's relative silence in deliberative bodies. They do note, however, that one individual mechanism at play is the fact that women have less confidence than men do in their public speaking ability and overall competence (p. 52). The

authors devote little time to this individual level mechanism as they argue and demonstrate how the right institutional arrangement can erase this lack of confidence. However, women will inevitably face deliberative situations where the institutional settings are not ideal. Without addressing the issues of confidence and internal efficacy, the problem remains. In response to this, the authors quickly recommend that women join programs to boost their confidence and watch more news. The issue here surely runs deeper than that. If women are socialized in a world where politics is a man's domain, then institutional arrangements can only go so far in addressing the issue of gender equality in deliberation.

Nevertheless, *The Silent Sex* is a major achievement. Far from being bogged down in minutiae, this book never shies away from big questions and never loses sight of the substantive significance of its findings. As a result, this work significantly contributes to our understanding of issues as fundamental as gender, deliberation, and representation. The gender inequality highlighted by Karpowitz and Mendelberg poses an enormous threat to the promise of deliberation. Those involved in deliberation should pay close attention to this finding but also to the finding that this inequality can be mitigated if enough care is given to the design of deliberative institutions.