

Picturing Politics: Female Political Leaders in France and Norway

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Abstract

This article explores images of high-level female politicians in France and Norway from 1980 to 2010, examining the ways in which they present themselves to the media and their subsequent reception by journalists. What changes have emerged in the images and receptions of female politicians in the two countries? Women in French politics have experienced difficulties living up to a masculine heroic leadership ideal historically marked by drama, conquest, and seductiveness. In contrast, Norwegian female politicians have challenged the traditional leadership ethos of conspicuous modesty and low-key presentation. We argue that images of French and Norwegian politicians in the media are not only national constructions; they are also gendered. This implies that such images are not equally suitable or effective for men and women, a critical dimension that is not fully captured in the initial theory about cultural and national repertoires. Seven images of women in politics are discussed: 1) Men in skirts and ladies of stone, 2) seductresses, 3) different types of mothers, 4) heroines of the past, 5) women in red, 6) glamorous women, and 7) women using ironic femininity. The last three images—color, glamour and irony—are identified as new strategies that female politicians use to accentuate their positions of power with signs of female sensuality. It is thus possible for female politicians to show signs of feminine sensuality and still avoid negative gender stereotyping.

For most men, most of the time, politics is a series of pictures in the mind, placed there by television news, newspapers, magazines and discussion.

Murray Edelman (1964:5)

Edelman's quote (above) illustrates the importance of "pictures placed in the mind," that is, visual images, in politics. Such images provide the public with knowledge about the world of politics and enable politicians to address a mass audience (Stanyer and Wring 2004). They may express what a politician stands for. As studiously crafted displays of ideals, they may also enlarge, challenge, complete or substitute qualities and values (Krogstad 1999). These capacities make images effective tools in political persuasion.

Despite their central position in political communication, researchers have largely ignored cultural imagery and visual symbols in their research, often giving priority to research on sound bites over image bites (Graber 2001; Schill 2008; Seizov and Müller 2009). This is surprising, since politicians themselves and their observers are quite aware of how images may strengthen—or damage—their positions as holders of power. While not aiming at a comprehensive view, this article tries to capture the visual mode of political communication by comparing images, or personal-political profiles, of high-level female politicians in France and Norway. We also discuss how their visual performances and projected qualities are commented upon in the media. The central questions we ask concern how political images are contextualized within national and cultural repertoires, how gender influences visual strategies and evaluations, and how these gendered repertoires have been expanded on and changed in Norway and France the last thirty years.

IMAGES, NATIONAL CULTURAL REPERTOIRES AND GENDER

We base our approach to images on 1) how politicians present themselves and their general political identity visually (often with the help of professional image makers, but without full control of the media's coverage decisions), and 2) on the written descriptions that are attached to these aesthetic presentations by the media. We thereby understand the term "image" both as performance of a specific political identity and as "reputation, trustworthiness and credibility" (Scammel 1995:20). The time span we address is 1980 to 2012, ranging from Edith Cresson to Ségolène Royal, Martine Aubry, Marine Le Pen and the present female ministers in France and from Gro Harlem Brundtland to the many present female party leaders and ministers (sometimes referred to as the "blonde pit bulls") in Norway.

Since, as Müller rightly argues, the rules that apply to the creation of visual meaning "are less standardized and more context-dependent than the meaning created and communicated in the textual mode" (Müller 2007:13), we pay extra attention to *cultural contexts*. The idea that values and symbols endemic in the broader political culture affect the success or failure of women in politics has always been commonly assumed, and has finally been demonstrated in convincing ways by Norris and Inglehart (2000) and Paxton and Kunovich (2003), using systematic comparative evidence. Norris and Inglehart claim that culture is the long suspected 'X'-factor distinguishing "the striking advancement of women in parliaments in the Scandinavian north from their European neighbors in the Mediterranean south" (2000:14). In our analysis of cultural contexts, we draw on the term "cultural repertoires." Swidler (1986) introduced this term in order to study culture's role in shaping interpretation and action. Lamont and Thévenot (2000) elaborated on the term for comparative purposes, using the term "national cultural repertoires of evaluation." Moving beyond simplistic essentialist models of national character, these repertoires

of evaluation consist of frames of interpretation and strategies of legitimization employed within specific national contexts (Lamont and Thévenot 2000). These tools are deemed “to be available across situations and to pre-exist individuals, although also transformed and made salient by individuals” (Lamont and Thévenot 2000:5-6). We use these perspectives in comparing the visual repertoires of politics in France and Norway. However, our approach differs somewhat from earlier ways in which cultural repertoires have been studied. While Swidler (1986; 2001), Lamont and Thévenot (2000) and Tavory and Swidler (2009) focus on verbal frames for argumentation and interpretation, we focus on repertoires that are both non-verbal (visual self-presentation) and verbal/textual (written characterizations of politicians’ aesthetic performances).

In addition to studying how national cultures influence the repertoires for political representation, we study the influence that gender has on politicians’ performances and their reception. Masculinity and femininity are social constructions with powerful consequences for both action and interpretation. In particular, we have found that for male and female politicians, the role sexuality plays for them differs. For instance, powerful men have often been perceived as “sexy,” while female politicians have experienced negative stereotyping for both being too sexy and for not being sexy enough. Bourdieu (1998) argues that this is not a coincidence, but works within the logic of what he calls “the gender system.” For men, the characteristics of power and sexuality have usually reinforced one another, while for women the opposite has been true (Bourdieu 1998). This might not hold true in all societies. And Skeggs (1997; 2004), discusses ways around this dilemma, namely that women can display signs of female sexuality without being negatively affected. Skeggs interestingly claims that this may be achieved through the use of glamour. We will later discuss cases demonstrating how female politicians use glamour, as well as irony, to expand national cultural repertoires for political representation. However, let us

first present some earlier studies on political representation that demonstrate the national and gendered dimensions of these issues.

EARLIER STUDIES ON POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

Earlier research demonstrates that French politics, with its historical links to famous salons, court intrigues and revolutions, has been influenced by conspiracies, dramas, aestheticism, grandeur and seduction (Drake and Gaffney 1996). The *grandeur* of French political leaders is not surprising considering that France is imbued with the heritage of a Great Power tradition. Norway, on the other hand, has been characterised by a very different political leadership ideal. The Norwegian puritanical tradition, together with a strong accentuation on equality stemming from the old peasant society, laid the ground for a leadership ideal marked by closeness to the people and orientation toward more interior values—what Daloz (2007) calls “conspicuous modesty” and Henningsen and Vike (1999) term “ordinary people’s power.” Krogstad and Storvik (2007) find that there has been a stronger emphasis on charisma and what they call “effortless superiority” in France than in Norway. They also find two different types of charisma, demonstrating that such traits are contextual: In France, the charismatic leader is a seductive hero, while in Norway the charismatic—or, rather, charming—leader is an ordinary human being, an ideal that seems to be more accessible for women.

Another difference that stands out in the comparison of the two countries is that visual appearance is more accentuated in France than in Norway. Daloz (2003) points out the stronger emphasis on ostentatious displays of power in France than in Norway. Lamont (1992:138) finds that elegance, fashion and refinement are cherished qualities for the upper-class in France, which

is a notion based in the French aristocracy's heritage of an emphasis on outward appearance. In their analysis, Krogstad and Storvik (op. cit.) refer to the fact that Norway barely even had an aristocracy, and that to the extent that there was one, its origin was foreign. Nordic countries are characterized by what Tjeder (2003) calls the "power of inner character," which is shown through an ascetic outer appearance. Tjeder argues that this may be the reason why Nordic politicians' clothes have historically seemed less influenced by notions of style and fashion.

A striking fact in a comparison of the images of French and Norwegian male leaders is nevertheless how similar they look, at least at a superficial level. They are all using the conventional code of dress that suppresses individual expression and emphasizes the professional: *the suit*. This is not surprising when we take into account that the suit has changed little in the last 150 years (Rubinstein 2001). But again, there are important differences: In both countries, suits are read as signs of class, but in Norway the *lack* of elegance—for example, suits made of rumpled, inexpensive materials that don't necessarily fit the man wearing them—was for a long time regarded as a proud sign of *not* belonging to the upper classes, at least for the leaders on the left (Krogstad and Storvik 2010).

Not all of the studies mentioned above focus on gender. However, a considerable literature exists regarding political representation and gender. This research has focused primarily on two questions: Do female politicians behave the same way as male politicians? And when they do, are they perceived the same way? To the first question, there is no conclusive answer—research differs and findings have to be tied to specific contexts (see, for example, Niven and Zilber 2001; Little, Dunn and Deen 2001; Bystrom and Kaid, 2002; Ibroscheva and Raicheva-Stover 2009; Murray, in press). That being said, signalling sameness and signalling difference are both fraught with dangers, and generally women have to engage in balancing acts (Shames 2003:120).

There is generally more agreement about the second question, that is, the evaluation of female politicians. When female politicians use existing national repertoires, they are not always evaluated the same way as male politicians. Research on politics, gender and media dynamics worldwide reveals that media coverage of female politicians is more negative (Ibroscheva and Raicheva-Stover 2009). Women politicians receive less press coverage than men, and the type of coverage they receive is different, focusing more on their political viability than their stance on political issues (Kahn 1992). In her broad study of media coverage of women in politics Norris finds that gendered remarks are made of female leaders as “consiliatory, compassionate, and sensitive” while men are regarded as “strong, ambitious and tough” (Norris 1997:159). However, she also finds examples of women being described as more confrontational than their male rivals, a finding that corresponds well with Krogstad’s research on Norwegian female politicians’ actual behavior in political debate: They are in fact more confrontational than their male colleagues (Krogstad 1999; 2004).

Concerning physical appearance Braden (1996), Aday and Devitt (2001) and Ibroscheva and Raicheva-Stover (2009) maintain that journalists more often comment upon the appearance of female politicians than that of their male counterparts, and it is mainly women who are attributed with an “inner character” based on their appearance (Stacey 1994). Therefore, appearance seems to be more crucial for female politicians than for male politicians (Kahn 1994; Ross and Sreberny 2000). Female politicians are forced into “clichés well past their use-by date” (Ibroscheva and Raicheva-Stover 2009:123), i.e. they struggle with stereotyping, whether as honorary males, and thus dowdy traitors to their sex, or as some combination of mother, stranger, fashion victim, babe, intellectual lightweight, femme fatale or slut.

DATA AND METHODS

We have chosen to compare Norway and France both for their similarities as well as their differences. Both are modern Western countries, with highly developed welfare states and rather large public sectors. Political party formations, with the left-right divide, share certain fundamental commonalities (Baldersheim and Daloz 2003). But there are also striking differences. The elitism and strong hierarchy present in French society clearly differs from the relatively egalitarian Norwegian society, and earlier studies indicate that gender relations in the two countries are constructed somewhat differently (Apfelbaum 1993).

A comparison of political representation in France and Norway is particularly interesting. France, one of the first countries which gave all men the right to vote (1848), was one of the last countries to extend this right to women (1944). In Norway women were granted the right to vote in 1913. The number of female parliamentarians has increased rapidly since the 1970s. In 2010 40 percent of Norway's parliamentarians are female, while the figure is 19 percent in France. The feminist movement in Norway became early allied with politics and the state apparatus, and terms like "state feminism", "women-friendly society", and "laboratory of equality" have been used since the 1980s. In France, the issue of parity became hot in the 1990s, generating a high level of public interest, but also much ambivalence (Ramsay 2008). In 2001, the 'exceptional' principle of 'equal access' for women to political mandates was written into French electoral law.

Since the two countries are in many ways such an unlikely pair for comparison, the approach chosen in this study may be termed "contextual and reflexive" rather than "comparative" in the strict sense of the word (Baldersheim and Daloz 2003). The choice of this "reflective" methodology is done with the intention to gain an understanding of implicit meanings, preconditions and options for aesthetic self-presentations in politics. It can be seen as a

technique that eschews quantification in favor for “an inductive search of deep historical and social meanings and interpretations” (Ibroscheva and Raicheva-Stover 2009:116). More specifically, the method is inspired by an approach that anchors the evaluation of politicians’ self-presentation in what can be defined as *acceptable* or *unacceptable* within each nation (Daloz 2006).

The study includes female prime ministers (in both France and Norway), female candidates for these positions and for the presidency in France, ministers and party leaders. In order to draw comparisons with their male counterparts, we rely on earlier studies of male political representation in the two countries (the main sources here are Daloz 2003; 2007; 2008; Krogstad and Storvik, 2007; Krogstad and Storvik 2010). The empirical sources are a theoretically guided sampling of female politicians’ visual appearance and journalists’ comments about them. For the period from 1980 to 2000, we base our analysis on descriptions and political biographies produced by journalists and popular writers. For the period 2000–2010, we have collected material (major newspapers of different political orientation, magazines, journals in both countries) using a systematic library and Internet search. These diverse materials are sources that ordinary people use to form their opinions about politicians.

In the journalistic evaluations of the politicians’ visual performances and the inner character that they infer from outer appearance (such as charming, seductive, strong, motherly), we have looked both for what may be termed typical characterizations as well as more unusual descriptions. We thereby attempt to identify both the core and the range of the national and cultural repertoires of evaluation, using both serious and tabloid press. In order to capture the fringes of the repertoires, we have a broad collection of female politicians’ visual self-presentations that have been described in the media as challenging—and therefore have created especially heated debate. The fact that they receive considerable media attention suggests an

impact on mass culture. These incidences are particularly intriguing because they indicate where these self-presentations are no longer acceptable. This “critical case sampling” (Patton 1990:174-175) resembles Lamont and Thévenot’s (2000) strategic focus on “hot issues,” which they find most useful for comparative analysis. We have paid extra attention to photos and description of photos that seem to confirm, oppose or expand on the theoretical perspectives earlier introduced.

Both authors have read and studied paper or electronic versions of photos and descriptions, including headlines, articles, profiles and more general debates surrounding the photos. We have also underlined journalistic descriptions of their physical and psychological appearance (not least the adjectives used) and their view on the general performance of female politicians. Seven categories gradually emerged.

IMAGES OF FEMALE POLITICIANS

How, then, have female politicians used the existing national repertoires to create their political images during the last 30 years? The following categories are discussed: 1) Men in skirts and ladies of stone, 2) seductresses, 3) different types of mothers, 4) heroines of the past, 5) women in red, 6) glamorous women, and 7) women using ironic femininity. The images described in the following are ordered chronologically according to when they first appear in Norwegian and French politics, although some of the female politicians have adopted other images later in their careers. Some of the politicians are also placed in more than one category.

MEN IN SKIRTS AND LADIES OF STONE

The first women who entered national politics positioned themselves—and were positioned—according to male-dominated political traditions. Up until the early 1980s, there had been few women in Norwegian politics. This changed with Gro Harlem Brundtland, who became Norway's first female prime minister in 1981. In 1986, 44 percent of the ministers she appointed were female. This was regarded as a women's coup d'état, and was reported worldwide. Since then, between 40 and 52 percent of Norwegian cabinet ministers have been women, a level that France did not reach until recently.

Photographs of Brundtland in the early 1980's show her wearing shoulder-padded jackets and skirts, a practice followed by many of her female colleagues. The jacket was often interpreted as a sign of masculinity, a sign that was moderated to some degree by the wearing of a skirt instead of trousers. She was not regarded as particularly glamorous or fashionable, and both she and many of the other female ministers were called "men in skirts" (Skjeie 1992). Brundtland's appearance might also have contributed to a negative nickname, "the loud-mouthed bitch from Bygdø" ("kjeftesmella fra Bygdø") (Hirsti 1989:8). The nickname "kjeftesmella," reserved only for women, indicated that she was robust and loud and therefore not ladylike, modest and feminine.

The French female politician, Martine Aubry, a former Minister of Labor (1991-93) who has since become the leader of the Socialist Party, is also of interest in this regard. She has generally adopted a professional image without much refinement. Aubry's lack of an elegant and seductive image was apparently not appreciated; she was called "a monk in a skirt" and "the lady of stone" and often referred to as "boring" (Ramsay 2003:196).

SEDUCTRESSES

The woman who has held the highest position in French politics to date is Édith Cresson. She held four different ministerial posts during the 1980's, and in 1991-92, served as prime minister. At the beginning of her period as prime minister, she was perceived as attractive—yes, even sexy. According to Ramsay (2003:159), Cresson had the image of a coquette; she was seen as a seductive, devouring and dangerous woman. Most newspaper photos show her in a suit jacket and a skirt in varying colors.

[Place Picture 1 here]

Cresson herself felt that the media dwelled on her short skirts and big earrings to such a degree that she eventually toned down her look (Ramsay 2003). Speculation also flourished as to how she got her appointment. President François Mitterrand was attributed as having performed a role beyond the formal one that French presidents normally have in appointing prime ministers. Cresson was seen as the reincarnation of Madame de Maintenon, the mistress of Louis XIV, and after resigning from office, she claimed that as for the fantasies about women in politics, “they’re either too old or too young, too ugly or too beautiful, too much something or too little something else, and if she succeeds in something, it’s because she has slept with a man who is the key” (Ramsay 2003:191). Cresson became one of the most unpopular prime ministers France has ever had.

A later example is Minister of Justice Rachida Dati. The daughter of immigrants from North Africa, Dati also tried the sexy look, with limited success, according to journalists. With her frequent use of stilettos and designer clothing, she was accused of being more fond of fashion and gems than of ministerial dossiers. Appearing in the magazine *Paris Match* wearing a pink

leopard-print Dior dress with fishnet stockings and stiletto-heeled black boots did not help dampen this impression. Like Cresson, she was depicted as an *intrigante* and a cynical courtesan. However, there might have been many other reasons besides their choice of fashion why Dati, and Cresson before her, had to leave their posts.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF MOTHERS

As mentioned, Gro Harlem Brundtland was characterised early in her career as a “man in a skirt.” Being a mother of four, publicly demonstrating her fondness for children and her active promotion of women all helped to slowly change this rather unkind image. As a mature stateswoman, she was often referred to as the mother of the nation. Her age and robust appearance seemed to support this image. Her popularity increased proportionally with the width of her waist, according to *Dagbladet* (28 September, 2002).

Ségolène Royal, one of the main contenders for the French presidency in 2007 and widely thought of as one of the most popular and charming female politicians in France (*Le Monde*, 31 January 2006; *Paris Match*, 15 March 2006), has also been associated with motherhood, but of a more elegant kind. Like so many of the female French politicians before her, Royal used the suit-equivalent or shift dress, but she did not wear short skirts, big jewellery or high fashion clothing. According to journalists, she constructed a professional image, but not an overtly sexy one. Royal portrayed herself first and foremost as a mother (*Femmeactuelle*, 27 February, 2006). In the 1990s, as the first Frenchwoman to have a baby while she was a minister, Royal had paraded her motherhood in the media, giving interviews from and being photographed in the hospital bed shortly after giving birth to her fourth child. She has argued that women, and therefore of course indirectly she herself, are more down-to-earth, caring and community-oriented than men (Ramsay 2003), and therefore, women also make other political priorities than men. This kind of rhetoric

portrays her as essentially different from and morally better than men, a strategy the first female senior minister in France, Simone Veil, also employed to a certain degree (Ramsay, 2003).

The unmarried Minister of Justice, Rachida Dati, who gave birth to a daughter in 2009 while in office, was accused of not being a “proper” mother. The French seemed to accept that the minister did not want to name the father of the child. However, when Dati returned to work only five days after her Caesarean section, wearing a chic outfit and high heels, several newspapers reported this as a disservice to working women—in effect, rushing them back to the office.

HEROINES OF THE PAST

Many male leaders have likened themselves to—and have been portrayed as—great national figures from the past. To mention just one example, President Nicholas Sarkozy declared both Napoleon and de Gaulle as his ideals. How could female competitors match such historical figures? In the French context, the first figure that springs to mind is Jeanne d’Arc. Indeed, Royal officially declared Jeanne d’Arc as *her* ideal in the 2007 presidential campaign. In one picture, we see a graciously smiling Royal standing beside a white horse.

[Place Picture 2 here]

The picture is perhaps meant to reveal Royal’s caring attitude towards animals, which again could be interpreted as evidence of her caring attitude generally. In addition to the white horse, which evokes Jeanne d’Arc’s white horse, she chose to dress in white, the color of her heroine. As a matter of fact, a white skirt and a white jacket nearly became her trademark in the election campaign. She wore endless variations on this white theme, from cashmere coats to cropped-

sleeve jackets. Royal had to make an impression in more than one way; all opinion polls indicated that Nicolas Sarkozy was going to win the 2007 election. In the final televised debate with Sarkozy, she not only appeared more aggressive and attack-oriented, she also changed her visual image. This time Royal adopted a military look, wearing a sophisticated white shirt and a black, broad-shouldered power jacket. As we all know, this late blossoming commander-in-chief image was not enough to help her win the election.

[Place Picture 3 here]

As far as heroic imagery, what does Norwegian history offer to female politicians? In discussions about what female politicians should wear—for instance at the annual gala dinners at the royal castle—many have argued that they should wear the traditional folk costume (*bunad*) from their respective regions (*Dagsavisen*, 22 November, 2005). Many female politicians have in fact used these embroidered costumes as gala attire. This national costume was created in the nineteenth century and projects an image of a strong, decisive, respectable farm wife. The press has always applauded this use of the folk costume, praising the costumes them for their beauty.

WOMEN IN RED

In the final TV debate before the Norwegian election in 2003, we see six party leaders. The five male party leaders are wearing dark suits, while the only woman in the group, the Socialist Left's Kristin Halvorsen, is wearing a red jacket.

[Place Picture 4 here]

In the final pre-election TV debate four years later, we see the leaders from the same parties. Now four of them are women and three of them are wearing red jackets. As the colour red signals revolt in a Norwegian context, it might not be accidental that the only Norwegian female party leader who does not wear red is the leader of the Conservative Party, Erna Solberg. Also Royal, while mostly dressing in white, used red outfits on occasion—and these outfits made her stand out in the political crowd.

While the Norwegian party leaders have accentuated difference through clothing, they have behaved similarly to men when it comes to toughness in political debates. They have been just as attack-oriented, dominating the floor just as much as their male rivals—without receiving negative evaluations (Krogstad 1999; 2004). In fact, a British newspaper characterises the Norwegian female party leaders as “formidable blonde pit bulls” (*Standpoint Magazine*, 23 January, 2009), of course referring to Sarah Palin’s description of herself as a “pit bull with lipstick.”

GLAMOROUS WOMEN

As we have shown, female politicians have become aesthetically more diverse since their entry into politics in both France and Norway. However, from around the year 2002 in Norway and around 2008 in France, female politicians have taken this experimentation to new levels. They have started to infuse politics with what journalists have called glamour and sensuality.

[Place Pictures 5 and 6 here]

Attending official events, they wear much more revealing outfits than their predecessors did and the media has published pictures from official dinners and fashion shows, commenting explicitly on their choices of outfits.

Most of the Norwegian female politicians have received positive evaluations by the press for their choice of dresses, but some have been criticised for lack of taste. The female ministers in Sarkozy's government, often referred to as his "sirens," have received jealous comments from British journalists who asked why the French politicians were so much more glamorous than their own. At an official Elysée Palace dinner, depicted as "a beauty parade that would grace any catwalk," the press let the superlatives fly: The Minister of Culture looked "dignified and stateswoman-like," the Foreign Affairs Minister looked "very glamorous," the Minister for the Interior showed off "a good bosom without being tarty" and the Justice Minister "stole the show in a stunning midnight blue gown" (*Mail Online*, 12 March, 2008).

WOMEN USING IRONIC FEMININITY

Norwegian politicians have also experimented with glamour in a more playful way. In one picture from 2004, we see the Socialist Left leader and later Minister of Finance, Kristin Halvorsen, dressed as a bare-shouldered prima ballerina in *Swan Lake*.

[Place Picture 7 here]

However, Halvorsen's body language is not ballerina-like; she looks very tough and determined, something that gives the picture an ironic edge. Another picture shows the Minister of Transport, Torild Skogsholm, "dressed" in six tires.

[Place Picture 8 here]

Exposing bare shoulders, Skogsholm appears to be naked inside the stack of tires, but the photo is not revealing and the humorous intent is evident. In still another picture, we see the frequently criticized Minister of Children and Equality, Karita Bekkemellem, bare-shouldered in a silk evening dress, being burned as a witch on a bonfire. In one of the most famous pictures, published in Norway's largest tabloid paper (*VG*, 29 October, 2005), the voluptuous Conservative Party leader Erna Solberg is dressed in a blue gala gown entering a pond with water lilies.

[Place Picture 9 here]

The dress is floating upon the water's surface; the picture, which many readers found astonishing, portrays Solberg as quite sensual.

The playful aesthetic self-presentations we have seen in women's magazines and newspapers in this last decade represent something new in Norwegian politics and have, of course, provoked controversy and debate. Some have argued that these are not appropriate ways for politicians to pose and that such presentations will ruin people's respect for politics (*Dagsavisen*, 22 November, 2005). An especially heated discussion took place in *Dagbladet* and other papers in September 2002. Some argued that the photo stunts distracted from serious political debate. The media was criticised for being too interested in what female politicians were wearing, at, for example, the royal dinners. However, one well-known and widely respected journalist, Sissel Benneche Osvold, argued that journalists must allow politicians to do this, and the voters must accept it (*Dagbladet*, 21 September, 2002). These prominent Norwegian politicians certainly inspired debate, but the controversial photos do not seem to have harmed

their careers. Two of the party leaders who participated in these aesthetic experimentations in 2002 are still in office (Kristin Halvorsen and Erna Solberg), and one of the others has since become the leader of her party.

DISCUSSION: NATIONAL CULTURAL REPERTOIRES AND GENDER

Some of the images of female politicians described here can be interpreted as a result of women trying to adapt to the nation's cultural repertoire, some as attempts to renew it through traditional femininity, and others as attempts to expand or change the repertoire. We shall discuss and explain these strategies and their receptions successively.

ADAPTATION TO THE NATIONAL CULTURAL REPERTOIRE

In the 1980s, the strategies of the women who entered French and Norwegian politics were mainly to adapt to the existing cultural repertoire available for male political representation. Since the women's manners and priorities were not markedly different from those of male politicians, they were often accused of being "men in skirts" (Skjeie 1992). This was certainly the case with Norway's prime minister Gro Harlem Brundtland in her first years in office. When we take into consideration that so many pioneering women in politics have used this strategy, it might well have been the best strategy during this early phase.

As earlier research has shown, modesty and inner character were important elements in the Norwegian political repertoire. Poovey (1984) argues that in a historical perspective, modesty was seen as one of the trademarks of the proper lady and therefore of femininity. As such, this quality should not pose a problem for women. An exception from this is perhaps a certain

emphasis on outward appearance: a proper lady is supposed to be well dressed and carry some embellishments. Gro Harlem Brundtland and her female colleagues appeared as ordinary, not particularly elegant or fashionable, and in this way very much in line with the Norwegian cultural repertoire for political representation. One problem with women in politics before Brundtland was that they were so modest that they became almost invisible. Brundtland's outward modesty was, however, not accompanied with modest manners, but by self-assurance and a hot temper. This behaviour put Brundtland partly in opposition to both the national ethos and to traditional notions of femininity. Still, she was a highly successful politician. If we also take into consideration that she was the first and for some time the only highly influential female politician, this appears as somewhat surprising. One explanation might be that she was so different from the others politicians that she became difficult to read, and therefore, to categorize or pigeonhole.

In France, the aristocratic tradition, with its emphasis on outward appearance and seduction, constituted a very different political scene. Cresson was described as very much in line with the French tradition at the beginning of her term as prime minister: well dressed, superior and seductive. However, adapting to the existing national repertoire did not create a legitimate political image for Cresson in the long run. Ramsay (2003:183) describes Cresson's political path as a move from first being seen as charming and attractive, and then later being seen as vulgar.

Aubry, on the other hand, cultivated a desexualised and exclusively professional image, appearing as "one of the boys," but she was criticized for this. Having France's cultural heritage in mind, it is not surprising that lack of seductiveness would be questionable. What is less obvious is why seductiveness created such problems for Cresson. Many French male politicians have been described as seductive, but this quality has never backfired on them (Krogstad and Storvik 2007). This implies that in Cresson's case, the problem appears to be related to

constructions of gender. Rachida Dati's destiny might also indicate that a seductive image is still a problem for women in French politics. Dati cultivated an image much in line with Cresson and also had to leave her post after a short time in office.

The French case confirms Bourdieu's insight about the different role sexuality plays for men and women in powerful positions. But it does not appear to be the passive and weak role associated with being a sexual object that is the problem in this case. Neither Cresson nor Dati were ever seen as weak; both were described as tough and cynical. What was at stake here was that both were implicitly and explicitly accused of being intriguing and dangerous *femmes fatales*. According to Doane (1991:2), the femme fatale often appears as having power as a result of strong, uncontrollable desires. While many French male politicians have been described in similar terms—indeed, as morally impaired—none have been accused of possessing evil characteristics. Why this impression, then? A historical glance into the past might give some clues. According to Poovey (1984), female sexual desire and a sense of evil were seen in the eighteenth century as two sides of the same coin. It was in order to avoid these supposedly natural female desires that women had to learn to control themselves and it was this struggle out of which the ideal of “a proper lady” developed. The new ideal femininity was a personality without any desires at all and therefore possessing neither sexual nor evil tendencies. In this respect, it is also interesting to note that the French revolution was primarily a riot against the perceived evil of the *female* aristocracy and especially the queen, Marie Antoinette (Hunt, 1991). No female politician in Norway has been accused of being cynical or evil. This could be accidental, but it is also possible that the cultural prominence of a desexualized mother figure has sheltered women from these accusations.

According to Skeggs (1997), the ideal femininity was and still is reserved for a particular type of woman, namely a white middle class and heterosexual female. This ideal is the most

passive and dependent of femininities and it is non-sexual, in opposition to other types of femininity. This might have been a particular problem for Dati, who grew up in a low-income housing area outside of Lyons and had a North African background. Women coming from the lower classes and women of color are often portrayed as “out of control, in excess” (Skeggs 1997:100). This might have exaggerated the sexuality ascribed to Dati and made her even more unacceptable.

We think the accusation of female politicians being “men in skirts” made them try out new models for political representation. To avoid criticism, they turned to other, more neutral symbols of femininity. While these symbols are very much alike in Norway and France, there also appears to be some differences regarding how different signifiers of femininity are valued in the two countries. We will look further into this in the next section.

RENEWAL THROUGH TRADITIONAL FEMININITY

Gro Harlem Brundtland widened the repertoire of the political game by presenting herself as both similar to and different from her male colleagues. Using the former, which was a conservative and low-risk strategy, she eased her way into high-level politics (as a “man in a skirt”); using the latter, for instance by attaining an image of a mother figure for the nation, she created a new image for women in politics. This was also Ségolène Royal’s main strategy. She did not make Cresson’s errors. Although good-looking and well dressed, she steered clear of the seductive image. By frequently dressing in white, she cultivated an image of herself as morally pure. This made her appear different from all the black suits in politics, her male colleagues, who were often accused of being corrupt.

A stereotypical view of women in politics is that they are more liberal, gentler and better able to handle issues that require compassion than men might be (Dolan, 2005; Murray, 2009, in

press). Through their emphasis on motherhood, Brundtland and Royal introduced a new element into politics: *caring*. According to Skeggs (1997), caring might be the most prominent marker of femininity, even though it is not mainly a visual construction. In fact, there seems to be a link between “caring, femininity and motherhood” (Skeggs 1997:66). Royal certainly personified this combination. Caring involves more than responsibility; it is the way women ultimately become respectable. To be caring involves being seen as responsible, unselfish, pure and non-sexual. Caring becomes a means of being morally superior, which in turn confers authority and dignity. The problem with caring is that it also presupposes a kind of selflessness, which perhaps is hard to combine with the pursuit of political power.

Admittedly, male politicians have been seen as caring father figures in both French and Norwegian politics. The father figure and the mother figure are, however, not identical. The high degree of selflessness and emotionality that is required from the mother figure does not seem to be required from the father figure.

Politics is nevertheless a balancing act. Our newspaper material reveals that Royal was criticised for a lack of so-called masculine leadership abilities. In contrast to Sarkozy, Royal was seen as emotional and spontaneous. She was not seen as able to put forward carefully reasoned arguments, instead she was said to use slogans and to lack intellectual depth (*Le Figaro*, 13 April, 2007; *Le Monde*, 17 April, 2007). One reason for this might be that the emotionality immanent in the mother image made her appear unprofessional. Professionals are supposed to possess skills and knowledge that require rationality and self-control. The model of early professionalism was essentially masculine, and women were seen as antithetical to professional norms and conduct—as lacking in self-control, or as unpredictable in crisis (Burriss 1996:67). Nevertheless, in Norway Brundtland was most popular when seen as the mother of the nation, but by then she had already proven her professionalism in her previous years as a decisive prime minister.

While the descriptions of the mother figure are mainly positive in Norway, our newspaper sources reveal that a certain negativity adheres to the mother figure in France. We think that differences in national cultural repertoires can explain this. The Norwegian political tradition, with its emphasis on modesty and inner character, is in harmony with many of the traits associated with the (Norwegian) mother figure. The French political tradition with seductive heroes is, however, very much in conflict with the desexualized mother image. In a comparative study, Apfelbaum (1993) found that in France, the desexualized (and almighty) mother figure threatened the heterosexual relationship between men and women that is so cherished in French society. Apfelbaum also found that in Norway, the equality oriented family has a particularly strong position—making both the mother and the father figures highly valued. If we link Apfelbaum’s study to the French national and cultural repertoire we see that the mother vs the father represent very different values within the family and French society. Mothers are protected and celebrated and defended, as long as they stay within the private sphere of the home. Removed from this sphere, they still become at minimum a puzzle, at maximum a threat. Yet another explanation of why the mother image is less welcomed into French politics might be proposed. In France, what is known as the “cult of reason,” inherited from the Enlightenment, is highly valued (Lamont 1992:137), and intellectuals have a higher standing in France than in Norway, which is characterised more by a certain anti-intellectualism (Slagstad 1998). Hence, in Norway the emotionality of the mother figure is not so threatening to core values as they might be in France.

Another way of adding feminine symbolism to political representation has been to borrow from and identify with historical female figures. But alluding to national heroines of the past might have unexpected results. When Cresson was compared to Madame de Maintenon (probably against her own will), it undermined her political independence. Royal’s own identification with

Jeanne d'Arc was also problematic. Jeanne d'Arc was certainly seen as a saint, but she was also a martyr, burnt at the stake, and this might have made Royal look like a victim more than a heroine. Similarly, the use of a Norwegian folk costume might have unintended consequences. As mentioned, when Norwegian female politicians wore these dresses, the press applauded. The costumes certainly portray women as respectable and "Norwegian." Wearing these dresses states that the women are not "fashion victims," and again, this might indicate that they in fact possess strong inner character. On the other hand, these folk costumes easily project women as more traditional than modern, more rural than urban, and more local than international. And although the traditional farm wife had power, she was not the head of the household.

Many of the politicians we have discussed so far demonstrate women's problems in politics: If women try to present themselves in the same way as men, they are not evaluated in the same way, and if women try to be different from men, they might very easily appear unsuited for the job. The national repertoire does not work for them in the same way that it does for men. When women try to introduce symbolism associated with traditional femininity, such as motherhood or the farm wife, it does not go exactly as one might hope. So how can women position themselves in the political scene in more enabling ways? We think that both the French and Norwegian cases provide some interesting clues.

RENEWAL THROUGH USE OF COLOR, GLAMOUR AND IRONIC FEMININITY

As we have seen, the introduction of feminine symbolism in politics often backfires. One particular problem appears to be that feminine symbolism often appears to imply a lack of strength. So how could female politicians overcome this problem? The "blonde Norwegian pit bulls" in their red shoulder-padded jackets created a new political image for themselves. In surroundings dominated by black suits, a bright color like red refers to femininity. At the same

time, the political use of the color red connotes a lack of submissiveness and even revolt. According to Shames (2003:127), the “woman-in-a-red-dress technique” used by female politicians is about signalling difference from the establishment. The red jackets therefore indicate femininity, strength and difference. In addition, the jackets, as opposed to dresses, signal professionalism or “business as usual.” This combined impression of strength and professionalism was further sustained through the politicians’ manners in the last decade; the female party leaders in Norway have been known as tough participants in debates. They have appeared visually different from male politicians, but not in manners. What is even more interesting is that they have not received bad reviews and marks in the newspapers for being dominant and even attack-oriented in debates (Krogstad 2004).

However, the red shoulder-padded jackets could not be used at gala dinners. On these occasions, the Norwegian women chose mainly to use glamour, as did their counterparts in France some years later. Glamour can be seen as a technique for combining respectability with sexuality and femininity (Skeggs 1997). As such, it is a way of avoiding being labelled “tart,” “man in a skirt” or “mother.” According to Stacey (1994), the glamour concept, developed in 1950s Hollywood, was soon adopted in Europe. She describes how women prior to this development sometimes had to choose between being respectable but boring mothers/housewives or unrespectable tarts. The glamorous female Hollywood film stars were neither because they were respectable, sexy and feminine simultaneously—an attractive alternative. Glamour was understood to signify sophistication and self-assurance and thereby was not only a way of appearing but also a way of feeling.

For female politicians, glamour has been associated with evening dresses at official gala occasions, and it has been used both by French and Norwegian female politicians. Another solution to the problem of appearing feminine without losing strength is the *irony* solution, only

found in Norway. It took the sexy and made it funny: “I am a ballerina who is tough and determined,” “I’m naked but wearing tires,” “I’m a nymph who is middle-aged and heavy.” Irony is a good solution because it supports the women's individuality while suggesting—but at the same time denying—the woman-as-sex-object image.

The irony solution indicates that the women are something other than mere politicians. In line with Goffman (1961), we could say that the women’s use of irony creates distance both from their political role and their expected feminine character. It is a way of being and not being simultaneously. The woman can have the best of both worlds. Such visually staged irony is typical for the art field, especially feminist art, in which classic icons of femininity are both constructed and deconstructed. Through visual strategies, women create distance from the femininities that are parodied in the work (Stacey 1994:7).

Glamour, with or without irony, is tightly knit to sensuality and outer appearance, but not in a way based on a heterosexual relation to men. Nor is feminine sensuality one whereby women are necessarily perceived as objects. On the contrary, these examples show women controlling the staging of their own sensuality. Compared to the attempts described above to introduce more traditional femininities on the political stage, these new attempts had the advantage of being not easily linked to weakness and submission. Stacey (1994:237) even argues that there might be a homoerotic pleasure embedded between the female spectator and the glamorous star. Whether there is a homoerotic element between the politician and the female voter is hard to know. Kristin Halvorsen explains her frequent appearances in women’s magazines, in which she has often posed in untraditional ways, more pragmatically—as a way to reach voters she does not normally reach.

A pertinent question arises: Why did glamour work in Norway as early as in 2002, given Norway’s emphasis on modesty and inward orientation in the past? This is a very surprising

development. That glamour appears on the political stage in France is more understandable, given France's fashion industry and aristocratic legacy. But why does it appear so late compared to Norway? The tolerance for the experiments in glamour and irony in Norway must be understood against the background of a strong women's movement and the introduction of quotas in politics. Quotas made women enter politics earlier than in most other countries (not least France). From the mid-1980s, Norwegian voters have become accustomed to many and different kinds of female politicians. And as Kanter (1977) argues, numbers count. Numbers might also explain why the glamour card was played more openly by French female ministers in 2008; for the first time in France, women constituted nearly half the government. In any case, these examples, and especially the Norwegian ones, indicate that effective political imagery can take existing cultural formulas and apply them to strange new situations. We could never have predicted the emergence of some of the present female leadership images from the traditional ones of the past.

Finally, we would like to mention that the glamour phenomenon might create problems for female politicians. First, there is a thin line between what is considered glamorous and what is considered "tarty," as Cresson's case demonstrates. Second, a problem arises when the glamorous female politician is accused of using her sexuality strategically. At that point, the image of the evil woman is close at hand. Third, no female politician should be seen as *too* interested in clothes, for which both Dati and Bekkemellem have been criticized. As Skeggs (1997:108) maintains, too much interest in outer appearance is read as a sign that the woman in question lacks inner substance. Finally, it might be that the turn toward glamour has long-term or hidden implications that we do not yet recognize (Kontula 2008; Adelman and Ruggi 2008). It might empower high-level politicians under certain conditions, but can these strategies be used by women in the wider society? Is it possible that glamour and ironic femininity even perpetuate gender stereotypes or the gender order?

CONCLUSIONS

While contributing to the sparse but steadily growing literature on visual political communication, this article links research on gendered political images to a comparison of national cultural repertoires. To a certain degree, female politicians in France and Norway adopt the same visual images. However, there are interesting differences. These we attribute to differences in national cultural repertoires. We see an *effortless superiority* in many of the male French leaders. The Norwegian puritanical tradition, which led to a concentration on inner character, together with a strong accentuation of equality stemming from the old peasant society, laid the ground for a more modest leadership ideal marked by closeness to the people—a *conspicuous modesty*.

Our analysis shows that female politicians have both adapted to and radically expanded these national repertoires for political representation during the period 1980-2010. They have variously been portrayed as men in skirts/ladies of stone, seductresses, mothers, heroines of the past, “red jackets,” glamorous women and women displaying ironic femininity. The analysis of the reception of some of these images, i.e. the men in skirts or the seductresses, confirms that when women use the established national repertoire for political representation, it does not work in the same way for them as for men. This means that cultural repertoires are not only national, they may also be gendered, a dimension often neglected in earlier repertoire research.

We have explained women’s visual strategies as attempts to overcome the dilemma of conflicting stereotypes—being both similar to and different from their male predecessors can create problems. Using the former, a low-risk strategy, eases the women’s way into high-level

politics; using the latter emphasizes their image as “feminine.” On the bright side, the latter also secures their image as new and innovative.

Finally, the analysis demonstrates how national cultural repertoires of evaluation can change. In the last decade, Norwegian female politicians have paved a way around the dilemma Bourdieu (1998) described, namely that women cannot combine power and sexuality without undermining their authority. Through their use of glamour and irony, female politicians have proven that it is possible to show signs of feminine sexuality and still avoid negative gender stereotyping.

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PICTURE 1



French Prime Minister Edith Cresson, criticized for her sexy appearance.

PICTURE 2



Ségolène Royal, French 2007 presidential candidate: A white clothed and ‘royal’ Jeanne d’Arc.

PICTURE 3



Ségolène Royal with a military look.

PICTURE 4



Kristin Halvorsen, former Norwegian Socialist Left’s leader: A “blond pitbull” using the “woman-in-red” strategy.

PICTURE 5



Rachida Dati, the French Minister of Justice: Glamorous but troublesome?

PICTURE 6



Karita Bekkemellem, the Norwegian Minister of Children and Equality, challenging the Norwegian leadership ethos of “conspicuous modesty”.

PICTURE 7



Kristin Halvorsen posing as a determined ballerina.

PICTURE 8



Torild Skogsholm, the Norwegian Minister of Transport, certainly took responsibility for transportation, but no one would have expected her to cover her seemingly naked body in tires.

PICTURE 9



Erna Solberg, the Norwegian Conservative Party leader. Ironic femininity?