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Published on: 01 Feb 2006 - European Journal of Women's Studies (Sage Publications)

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Childs, S. (2006). The Complicated Relationship between Sex, Gender and the Substantive Representation of Women. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 13(1), 7-21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506806060003>

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The Complicated Relationship between Sex, Gender and the Substantive Representation of Women

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ABSTRACT Simply counting the numbers of women present in politics is an inadequate basis for theorizing the difference they might make. Drawing on research on British MPs (interviews with Labour women MPs first elected in 1997, analysis of Labour MPs' voting behaviour and signing of early day motions in the 1997 parliament, and MPs' participation in parliamentary debates accompanying the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act), this article shows how insights gained from empirical research can inform and improve our theorizing. It suggests that the relationship between women's descriptive and substantive representation is better conceived as complicated rather than straightforward.

KEY WORDS British politics ♦ gender ♦ New Labour ♦ sex ♦ women's descriptive and substantive representation

INTRODUCTION

From all four corners of the world demands for women's political presence are being made. Yet, claims that women *should* be present do not, in themselves, explain *why* they should be present. When the demand is made on the basis of a relationship between women's descriptive and substantive representation, Pitkin's classic criticism of descriptive representation is frequently articulated: that it is wrongly premised upon a link between representatives' characteristics and their actions (Pitkin, 1967: 66–72). Nonetheless, the claim of a relationship between women's descriptive and substantive representation remains appealing. The assumption that women representatives are more likely to act for women

than male representatives seems reasonable – to feminist academics, women and men representatives, as well as ordinary women and men.¹

This assumption is often understood in terms of the concept of critical mass: when there is a critical mass of women present (defined somewhere between 15 and 30 percent) politics will reflect to a much greater extent women's concerns. Yet, despite its popularity, the concept is increasingly being questioned.² Conceptually weak, it assumes, first, that the percentage of women in a particular political institution is the key to understanding women representatives' behaviour and effects. Second, it fails to consider why women might seek to act for women in the first place. Furthermore, studies reveal that the differences that follow from the presence of women representatives are contingent and mediated.³

Informed by empirical research on MPs in the British House of Commons, this article reconsiders conceptions of women's substantive representation. First, it explores the oft-made elision between sex and gender and examines how understandings of women's substantive representation can be defended against essentialist criticism and meet the challenge of women's differences. It then questions a second elision, this time between women's bodies and feminist minds. Finally, it addresses other factors that determine whether women representatives act for women in practice, emphasizing in particular the importance of placing women representatives within the actual political environments in which they act. In the UK, party identity and institutional norms are highlighted as important determining factors. In short, this article contends that the relationship between women's descriptive and substantive representation is better understood as complicated rather than straightforward.

In the study of women's substantive representation questions of methods are critical – to fully capture the difference women make and with regard to the status in which our findings are held by mainstream political science (Carroll and Liebowitz, 2003: 3). Quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews can establish whether women representatives are concerned with women's concerns and seek to act for women.⁴ They can also demonstrate whether women representatives are attitudinally feminist – answering the question of whether they seek to act for women in feminist ways (see Lovenduski, 1997). But studies must not be limited to finding observable and measurable *sex differences* in the attitudes and behaviour of representatives (Lovenduski and Norris, 2003). While such differences – with women being more concerned about, and acting on, women's concerns – would demonstrate that the presence of women engenders women's substantive representation, their absence may not prove the opposite (Reingold, 2000). Similarity in representatives' behaviour might reflect a convergence in gender roles that is hidden because sex is employed as a proxy for gender (Swers, 2002: 10). Alternatively, women's presence in politics may cause men to become more concerned

with women's concerns, leaving no sex differences (Reingold, 2000: 50). It could also be the case that quantitative research finds similar behaviour but hides differences in women's and men's levels of support for, or feelings about, that behaviour. Such studies might also miss other factors that determine women representatives' behaviour – such as their position within a particular institution and the freedom (perceived or real) for women to act on those concerns.⁵

The four research projects drawn on here, while not constituting the kind of large multi-method research projects that would comprehensively capture the relationship between women's descriptive and substantive representation, should, nonetheless, help refine conceptions of women's substantive representation (Carroll and Liebowitz, 2003; Dodson, 2001a; Swers, 2002). Interviews with 34 of the 65 newly elected Labour women MPs in 1997 (and follow-up interviews with 23 in 2000) provide rich qualitative data revealing women's perceptions and practice of the substantive representation of women (Childs, 2004).⁶ However, as few strong conclusions about the behaviour of representatives can be drawn from self-reported claims (Lovenduski and Norris, 2003: 91) analysis of Labour MPs' voting records, signing of early day motions (parliamentary motions for which there is no debate) and contributions to the parliamentary debates that accompanied a piece of 'women's' legislation (the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act) are also considered (Childs, 2002, 2003; Childs and Withey, 2004; Cowley and Childs, 2003). As representatives may act for women by articulating women's concerns but with little or no effect, a distinction is made between the feminization of the political agenda (where women's concerns and perspectives are articulated) and a feminization of legislation (where output has been transformed) (Childs and Withey, forthcoming; Tamerius, 1995).⁷

REVISITING FEMINIST CONCEPTIONS OF THE SUBSTANTIVE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN

Arguments for women's political presence based on substantive representation claim that when present women are more likely to act for women than men. But this claim, especially when crudely portrayed, seems to be both reductive and essentialist. Unless one is happy to base the substantive representation of women on an essential understanding of women's identity or to reduce women's attitudes and behaviour back to their bodies, gender needs to replace sex as the basis upon which women representatives seek to act for women. And this is precisely what most feminist theorists do. In *The Politics of Presence*, Anne Phillips acknowledges that while there is no 'empirical or theoretical plausibility' to the idea that women share experiences or that women's shared experiences translate

into shared beliefs or goals. women do have particular concerns that derive from women's gendered experiences (Phillips, 1995: 53–5).

But even if one employs gender rather than sex, women's differences are likely to mean that women's experiences in a gendered society will be multiple – differentiated in terms of class, ethnicity and sexuality at the very least (Reingold, 2000: 45, 49; Squires, 1999: 215; Sawer, 2002: 5). Notwithstanding these differences, Jane Mansbridge holds on to the belief that women representatives can act for other women. While women representatives may not have shared the same particular experiences as the women they are representing, they share 'the outward signs of having lived through' the same experiences. This gives them 'communicative and informational advantages' and enables them to 'forge bonds of trust' with the women they represent based on their gendered experiences (Mansbridge, 1999: 641).

Similarly, Iris Marion Young talks in terms of a shared women's social perspective (Young, 2002: 137). This is derived from women being 'similarly positioned' in society and means that women 'are attuned to particular kinds of social meanings' and share affinity with one another (Young, 2002: 123, 136–7). Her example of American women legislators coming together to demand an enquiry into allegations of sexual harassment suggests that her concept can contend with women's differences. Although the women legislators may have agreed that the issue should be taken seriously, they may well have differed as to their views on sexual harassment per se and/or the guilt or innocence of the senator in question (Young, 2002: 140).

Despite these more nuanced responses to the challenge of women's differences, such conceptions have not gone uncontested. Laurel Weldon cuts to the chase:

If she is a white, straight, middle class mother, she cannot speak for African American women, or poor women, or lesbian women, *on the basis of her own experience* any more than men can speak for women merely on the basis of theirs. (Weldon, 2002: 1156)⁸

Accordingly, women's differences mean that there can be no set of women's policy positions or recommendations, only an 'agenda of topics for discussion or list of problem areas' (Weldon, 2002: 1157). Neither do women's perspectives reside 'completely in any individual' woman but are created when women interact with other women 'to define their priorities' (Weldon, 2002: 1154–7).⁹

Yet Weldon's ideas do not seem to be so distant from other theorists. For one thing, her example of women's shared concern for childcare is arguably akin to Young's example of women's concern with sexual harassment. While women may be divided over the issue of childcare –

with those seeking paid childcare desirous of lower wages and those women providing the care seeking higher wages – Weldon recognizes that both groups of women ‘confront the issue of the relationship between motherhood and work’ (Weldon, 2002: 1157). Furthermore, although she argues that women’s perspectives come from women interacting with one another, she admits that an individual woman representative can ‘articulate a truncated version of the group perspective’ ‘without interacting’ with other women ‘if she is so inclined’ (Weldon, 2002: 1158; emphasis added). Although this ‘truncated version’ is inadequate, Weldon’s statement implies that there is some kind of relationship between women’s descriptive and substantive representation. Otherwise, how can one explain why some women representatives are ‘so inclined’ to act for women (see Reingold, 2000: 35–6)?

What is needed for women’s substantive representation is, then, not the presence of ‘any old’ women (some of whom may not see themselves as part of, or with obligations to, the group women) but the presence, in Dovi’s terms, of ‘preferable descriptive representatives’ (Dovi, 2002: 729–34).¹⁰ Such representatives experience a sense of belonging to, and have strong mutual relationships with, women (Dovi, 2002: 736, 729). They share aims with women – in that they would want to see women’s ‘social, economic and political status’ improved – and experience a ‘reciprocated sense of having [their] . . . fate linked’ with women (Dovi, 2002: 736–7). Preferable women representatives also recognize differences between women and acknowledge that women may have ‘different conceptions of what is necessary’ to achieve women’s aims (Dovi, 2002: 737). But there are limits: a woman representative who does not share either ‘policy preferences’ or ‘values’ with women could not be said to share their aims (Dovi, 2002: 737–8).

At the theoretical level, then, a number of contemporary feminist theorists tell us that neither simple notions of sex nor gender are sufficient when theorizing the relationship between women’s descriptive and substantive representation. At the same time they seem able to reconcile women’s differences with theories of gender identity. But in order to draw any conclusions about the relationship between women’s descriptive and substantive representation *in practice*, it is necessary to establish both that women representatives are attitudinally predisposed to act for women (with their attitudes demonstrating a concern for women’s concerns) and whether they are attitudinally feminist (whether they are predisposed to act for women in a feminist or non-feminist way) (Carroll, 2001: xv; Dodson, 2001a: 17–20; Duerst-Lahti, 2001).

Sex differences in attitudes among British MPs are long established.¹¹ The most recent study confirms a gap between women’s and men’s attitudes towards women’s concerns (Lovenduski and Norris, 2003: 94–5). Interview-based research similarly provides supportive evidence (Childs,

2004). Many of those Labour women MPs first elected to the House of Commons in 1997 believe that acting for women is, at least, part of what they are elected for (Childs, 2004). Some 40 percent also considered that the concept of political representation included the representation of women. Nearly a third discussed a shared affinity with women and a similar proportion talked explicitly about the positive way in which they interpreted the responsibility to act for women. With nearly three-quarters of Labour's new women MPs identifying themselves as feminists, the interview data also suggest that the difference the women will make – if their attitudes translate into behaviour – will be a feminist one (Childs, 2004).

In line with contemporary feminist theory, the basis on which the women thought they could and would act for women was not sex but gender. Their sense of affinity with women derives from a belief in women's shared gendered experiences: 'I think there are common themes which touch upon the lives of many, if not most women; by and large women's experiences of life are different from men's' (Childs, 2004: 73). At the same time, the MPs are cognizant of the complexity of women's identities, with ethnicity the difference that is most often highlighted. Importantly, this is not perceived to prevent the substantive representation of different women. Although there is a sense that acting for black women is different – as one MP acknowledged, she would not 'presume because I am a woman therefore I know what you think' – there remains a perception that women's gender experiences are shared by women. As another MP made clear, she can act for women even though she has not 'lived through' the same experiences as other women because she shares a sense of affinity with them.

Demonstrating their awareness of women's multiple identities, some of the MPs claim also to have acted for different women: activities such as arranging specific meetings with, and supporting the self-organization of different groups of women are identified as practical strategies through which different women can be substantively represented by women representatives (and the latter, in turn, held to account). As long as women representatives seek out, listen and respond to the opinions and perspectives of different women then the substantive representation can occur, according to these representatives, even if women share only some experiences.¹²

But gender is not, for these women representatives, everything. In political systems such as the UK, where party identity is a key feature structuring politics, women representatives' party identity complicates any understanding of the substantive representation of women (Mackay, 2001: 99; Squires, 1996).¹³ While many of Labour's new women MPs were happy to agree that women representatives from across the political spectrum share a concern with women's concerns (akin to Young's social

perspective) – they identified issues such as abortion, childcare, equal pay, housework, domestic violence, women’s health, drugs, unemployment, peace, justice and international cooperation – they mostly felt, abortion aside, that a woman MP’s analysis of, and response to, a particular concern is likely to be informed by (intertwined with) her party identity (Childs, 2004). As one of the MPs put it: ‘It’s when you come to the next stage about proposed policy and solutions then [you] get the divergence.’

Furthermore, finding Labour’s new women MPs predisposed to act for women and attitudinally feminist does not mean, necessarily, that they act in line with these attitudes. A failure to consider the particular contexts within which representatives act uncritically assumes that attitudes always and directly translate into behaviour.¹⁴ Institutions have an impact: in political institutions characterized by masculinist norms, indirect discrimination and sexism, heightened inter-party conflict and party-controlled systems of rewards, the space for women to act for women is likely to be reduced (Considine and Deutchman, 1996; Dodson, 2001a: 22–3, 7; Mackay, 2001: 97).¹⁵

So, how did Labour’s new women MPs fare? The women MPs were themselves optimistic. They considered that the articulation of women’s concerns would be the minimum effect of their presence. In 1997, half believed that their presence would enable the voicing of women’s concerns and a feminization of the parliamentary agenda (Childs, 2004). Three years later – when the women had greater experiences of acting in parliament – they were even more confident of their effect. Nearly two-thirds of the MPs argued that they had articulated women’s concerns (violence against women, forced marriages, sexual harassment, childcare, caring, breast cancer and emergency contraception) in the House. Moreover, not only did half of them now explicitly accept the link between the presence of women and the substantive representation of women, many talked about how women’s concerns would not have been raised, or would not have been raised in the same form, in their absence. Women MPs also claimed to have had an effect in select committees, with all of the MPs who discussed their work in select committees believing that their presence re-gendered their committees’ agendas.

However, and despite the women’s claims to have acted for women since their election, the dominant representation of them in the British media has been highly critical. Based on the classic, albeit increasingly criticized, approach of analysing representatives’ legislative voting behaviour, a sex difference between Labour MPs during the 1997 parliament is found: the newly elected women were less than half as likely to rebel against the party whip as the rest of the parliamentary party, and even those who did rebel, did so around half as often (Cowley and Childs, 2003). Yet, with male and female MPs (apparently) facing the same environmental pressures, the expectation was that this difference was an

artefact that would disappear once other factors were controlled for. However, sex continues to exert an influence on the MPs' propensity to rebel even after controlling for a range of factors (sex, newness, all-women shortlists, previous political history, ideology, ambition, legislative roles, age, marginality, personal characteristics), although the difference between the new women and men is not large enough (or consistent enough) to be statistically significant.

While it is not possible to explain why Labour's new women were more loyal – it cannot be deduced from their sex, because it was Labour's new women and not all women who behaved in this way – the women MPs themselves (or, rather, half of them) explain the difference by claiming to prefer a different style of politics: more 'behind the scenes' and less 'macho'. Unfortunately, such claims are difficult to test and the contention that there is a women's style of politics (held by more than two-thirds of the new Labour women MPs interviewed) is contested by other MPs, both male and female (Childs, 2004: Ch. 10; Cowley and Childs, 2003). The same difficulty applies to another possible explanation suggested by a few of Labour's new women; in a parliament where women feel alien, uncomfortable and under pressure to conform to dominant norms, the costs of rebelling (that is, of behaving like men) are simply too high (Cowley and Childs, 2003: 365).

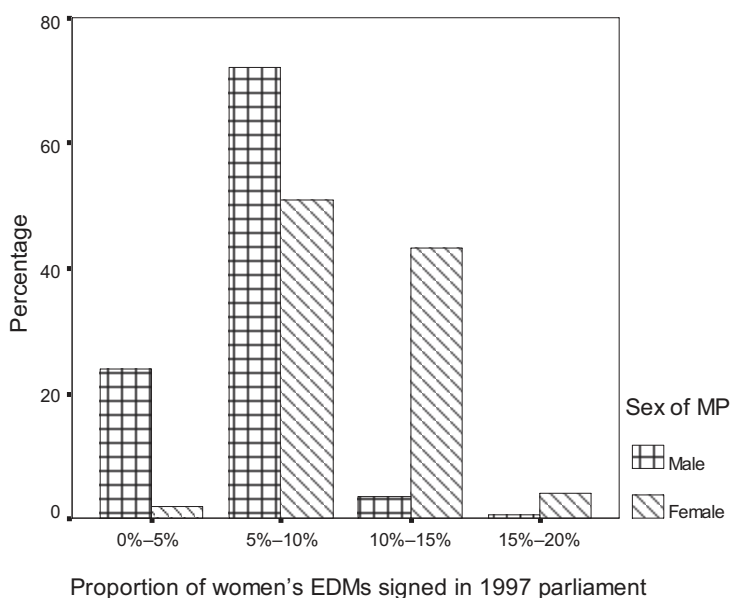
Another way to capture the factors that mediate the relationship between women's descriptive and substantive representation in practice is to look beyond voting, at the other activities MPs engage in to see if representatives are acting for women in these places (Dodson, 2001a; Tamerius, 1995). Indeed, when other activities that MPs engage in are looked at, a different picture emerges from that depicted by the analysis of their voting.

The parliamentary debates that accompanied the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act – an Act which allows political parties to introduce positive discrimination in the selection of parliamentary candidates – reveal that women MPs spoke disproportionately in the debates with male MPs (especially backbenchers) conspicuous by their absence (Childs, 2002, 2003). In addition to supporting the claim that women representatives are more likely to act for women than men, this research also shows the role of the party. Though women MPs of all parties were acting for women by speaking and (for the most part) supporting the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Bill, those MPs who were more likely to favour positive discrimination and to draw on the concept of substantive representation to support the legislation were Labour members (both male and female). In contrast, those MPs who spoke against the legislation, were hostile to positive discrimination and rejected the concept of substantive representation were mostly Conservative (Childs, 2002).

Analysis of the signing of early day motions (EDMs) provides another opportunity to examine the behaviour of MPs, in this instance in respect of a parliamentary activity that is relatively unconstrained (either by party or parliamentary norms): because the signing of a particular EDM takes very little effort and has few costs, it is likely that MPs will feel free to sign those that they agree with (Berrington, 1973; Finer et al., 1961). Analysis of EDMs in the 1997 parliament shows that Labour's (permanent back-bencher) women MPs¹⁶ are more likely to sign 'women's' EDMs – those that have as their primary subject matter women and/or their concerns – while Labour's male MPs are more likely to sign EDMs in general, although the differences are not statistically significant (Childs and Withey, 2004).¹⁷ Significant sex differences are, however, found in the percentage of 'women's' EDMs signed (Figure 1) ($p = .000$)¹⁸ and in the number and percentage of feminist 'women's' EDMs signed (Figure 2) ($p = .000$): women signed an average of 28.7 feminist 'women's' EDMs compared with 23.4 for men ($p = .009$).

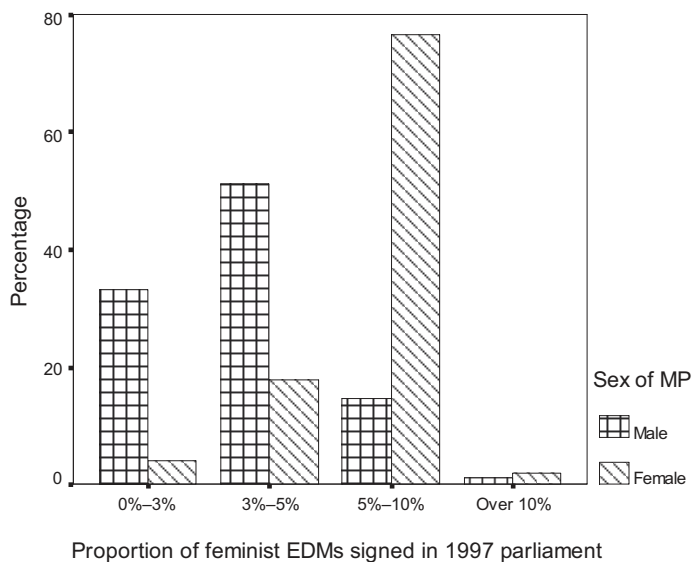
The nature of the 'women's' EDMs disproportionately signed by Labour's women MPs are those concerned, for the most part, with women's bodily integrity and which were coded as 'feminist' (Childs and Withey, 2004).

FIGURE 1
Proportion of 'Women's' EDMs Signed as a Total of EDMs Signed in the 1997 Parliament by Sex^a



^aFor analytical purposes, this variable was condensed into four categories

FIGURE 2
Proportion of Feminist EDMs Signed as a Total of EDMs Signed in the 1997 Parliament by Sex



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The assumption that the presence of women in politics will make a difference is widely held. Supporters of the concept of critical mass maintain that women representatives will act for women when there are enough of them present – although the point when this is supposed to happen is unclear. However, critical mass's failings are more fundamental: there is a failure to adequately theorize the relationship between women's descriptive and substantive representation; why should (on what basis will) women representatives act for women?

Feminist theory suggests that it is gender, rather than sex, that is the key to understanding this relationship: women representatives have gendered experiences as women that make them more likely to act for women. Though such claims are better than ones based on sex, feminist theories of women's substantive representation still have to contend with concerns related to essentialism and women's differences. If women do not constitute a homogeneous group (and both theory and empirical study suggest that they do not), how can women representatives act for them?

In addition to rejecting the oft-made elision between sex and gender, the elision between women's bodies and feminist minds should also be rejected. Whether women are attitudinally predisposed to act regarding women's concerns and whether they seek to act on these in a 'feminist'

way needs to be established rather than assumed. Women representatives' party identities also need to be examined (at least in electoral systems where party is important) in conjunction with consideration of the particular gendered environments in which they act.

If theories of women's substantive representation cannot simply count the number of women present and draw inferences about the likely effect, good empirical research must also think about the best way to investigate the nature and extent of the difference women representatives make in practice. The efficacy of different research methods should be reflected upon and sex differences should not be regarded as *the* proof that women make a difference; the changes effected by women may not show themselves in differences between women and men.

The discussion of the four different studies into the effect of Labour women MPs in the 1997 and 2001 parliaments presented here has illustrated the complicated relationship between women's descriptive and substantive representation. The balance of these studies supports the claim that women representatives will seek to act for women. Moreover, the basis for Labour's women MPs acting for women is, in line with feminist theorizing, not sex but gender. Most of the new Labour women MPs were also found to be attitudinally feminist. Party identity also matters.

Feminist claims that differences between women do not inherently rupture the acclaimed relationship between women's descriptive and substantive representation also find support among Labour's women. To be sure, their claims to have acted for different women are self-reported, but at the very least, they demonstrate that many of the women MPs (who are overwhelmingly white, middle class and highly educated) underpin their understanding of women's substantive representation on gender and not sex and are conscious of, and recognize the need to respond to, women's differences.

Nonetheless, knowing only the attitudes of Labour's women MPs is limited in what it can tell us about the relationship between women's descriptive and substantive representation. This can only be fully understood with reference to the gendered environments in which they act. In the UK, there is now behavioural evidence of sex differences between Labour's women and men MPs. In terms of their voting, the new women are behaving differently from their male peers, although this should not necessarily be interpreted as them acting for women (Cowley and Childs, 2003). Analysis of the signing of EDMs and of MPs' contributions in the parliamentary debates that accompanied the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act suggests that Labour's women are acting for women (Childs, 2002, 2003; Childs and Withey, 2004; Childs and Withey, forthcoming). These findings are important: the EDM analysis should convince sceptics who seek observable, measurable and 'hard' data; while both studies are suggestive of how the MPs might act in the absence of institutional constraining factors.

The balance of the research reported in this article suggests that there is some evidence of the substantive representation of women by Labour's women MPs since 1997. This is not to say that the relationship between women's descriptive and substantive representation is straightforward. Indeed, it remains messy, complicated by their identities and the political institutional contexts in which they act.

NOTES

1. See Childs (2004), Phillips (1995: 82), Vickers (1997: 23) and Whiteley (pers. comm., 2003).
2. Critics include but are not limited to: Beckwith (2003), Carroll (2003), Childs (2004), Considine and Deutchman (1996), Grey (2002), Lovenduski and Norris (2003), Reingold (2000), Swers (2002), Studlar and McAllister (2002), Thomas (2003) and Weldon (2002).
3. See note 2 above.
4. See Bochel and Briggs (2000: 64), Dovi (2002), Lovenduski (1997: 718) and Lovenduski (1990: 158).
5. See Baer (2003: 113), Beckwith (2003), Dodson (2001a: 12), Swers (2002) and Tamerius (1995).
6. The interviewees in 1997 and 2000 broadly reflected the whole population (Childs, 2004).
7. See also Mackay (2001: 98) and Lovenduski (1997).
8. See Dodson (2001a, 2001b), Weldon (2002) and Young (2002) for discussion of women's substantive representation through means other than, or in addition to, women representatives.
9. It is also to do with the context in which representatives function (this is addressed later) (Weldon, 2002: 1158).
10. Dovi acknowledges likely criticism of her work – in terms of essentialism and authenticity, who should define the criteria for the preferable descriptive representatives and whether such representatives would have sufficient autonomy to act for their group (Dovi, 2002: 733, 729).
11. See Lovenduski (1997), Lovenduski and Norris (2003) and Norris and Lovenduski (1989, 1995).
12. Clearly, this conclusion does not mean that the 'problem' of substantively representing different women is resolved. It does not negate justice, symbolic or style arguments for the presence of different kinds of women in politics.
13. MPs have sufficient autonomy to act other than in line with their party on some occasions (Phillips, 1998: 235–6).
14. Carroll (2001), Dodson (2001a), Duerst-Lahti (2001), Reingold (2000), Swers (2002) and Weldon (2002).
15. Similarly, some men may be attitudinally but not behaviourally feminist (Dodson, 2001b: 228–9, 236).
16. See Childs and Withey (2004) for a full discussion of the methodology used. All EDMs were coded as either 'women's' or 'non-women's' and then coded for direction (feminist, neutral, anti-feminist). The statistical tests used took two forms. For analyses on individual EDMs where the available responses were either 'signed' or 'not signed' then simple chi-squared tests were used. When cumulative signings were considered, then the mean number of

EDMs signed were compared. However, because the data were skewed and the two sex groups were of very unequal size, the non-parametric Mann Whitney test was used.

17. The difference here is just outside of the 5 percent significance level ($p = .058$).
18. The total number of 'women's' EDMs signed is divided by the total number of all EDMs signed.

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