

## Democracy and Citizenship: Theory and Practice

Jane Freedman  
*King's College, London*

‘Can Women Transform Politics?  
Women’s Demands for Equal Representation as a Catalyst  
of Institutional Change in Britain and France’

---

### Introduction

It could be argued that one of the major changes in the British and French political systems in the twentieth century was the granting of the right to vote and eligibility to all women in 1928 in Britain and 1944 in France. However, it seems to be a case of ‘plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose’: formal equality and rights of citizenship for women have not led to an equal participation by women in the political institutions of these two countries. Despite the suffragettes’ hopes that the fact of women having the vote would lead to a gradual increase in the number of women members of Parliament, this has not been the case, and in both Britain and France, the progress towards equal representation of men and women in parliament has been slow if not non-existent. In both Britain and France the proportion of women in parliament and government is small (7.4% in the British Parliament and 5.9% in the French *Assemblée Nationale*) compared to most other member countries of the European Union. This under-representation of women in the highest decision-making institutions has led to a renewal of pressure from women’s movements in Britain and France to find a way of increasing the number of women MPs and ministers. This article will examine the development of the *Mouvement pour la parité* in France, in comparison with the attempts to impose all-women shortlists in Britain, and then go on to examine presuppositions that if these movements were successful and women were equally represented in parliament and government in Britain and France, this would lead to a change in the functioning of these political institutions.

### Le Mouvement pour la Parité

The *Mouvement pour la parité* is an increasingly large and vocal movement in France calling for parity between men and women in all areas of professional life and particularly in political representation. The movement has developed in the context of a general malaise of the French political institutions and in response to public disaffection with established political parties. The demand for change in political institutions and personnel stemming from an increasingly critical view of the traditional élites which dominate French politics and which are seen as increasingly unrepresentative of the French population, has led to renewed interest in the lack of women in parliament and government and a new campaign to achieve greater equality of representation of men and women in political institutions. The idea that the under-representation of women is a key element in the

growing gap perceived between politicians and those they represent has become widespread.

The first impetus for the new movement in favour of parity came from a book published in 1992 by Françoise Gaspard, Anne Le Gall & Claude Servan-Schreiber, entitled *Au pouvoir citoyennes! Liberté, Égalité, Parité*.<sup>1</sup> The authors claim that the absence of women from political institutions and the exclusion of women from political decision-making undermine France's claim to be a democracy, and they call for an equal representation of women in all representative institutions, to be guaranteed by law. This demand has received strong support from, and could indeed be said to have revived, the French feminist movement which had been relatively inactive in the previous decade. Existing feminist groups have mobilised around the cause, whilst new co-ordinating bodies such as the *Reseau Femmes pour la Parité* have been organised and two regular newsletters, *Parité-Infos* and *La lettre de Parité* are published regularly. The movement is led and inspired mainly by women involved in politics or academia (or like Françoise Gaspard, ex-deputy and professor at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*) both fields, and these women have succeeded in gaining a lot of media attention for their movement. A manifesto in favour of parity signed by ten women politicians including Edith Cresson and other ex-ministers was published as an exclusive by *L'Express* magazine in June of this year and was followed by articles in all the main daily newspapers and news magazines. The movement's appeal is not limited, however, to women who have previously been involved in politics or to feminist academics. It has also attracted widespread support from a range of women who had not previously been affiliated to any feminist movement, as can be affirmed by the large attendance at meetings and demonstrations organised in favour of parity. A demonstration in front of the National Assembly in October 1993 was attended by thousands of women and petition in favour of parity sent out to women's associations at the end of 1995 received 20,000 signatures within 10 days.

Nor has the support for the movement come solely from women. In November 1993, *Le Monde* published a 'Manifeste des 577 pour une démocratie paritaire', of which 288 of the 577 signatories were men. Opinion polls suggest that a large majority of the French population is in favour of parity. A poll conducted by IFOP for *L'Express* magazine in May 1996 found that 71% of those interrogated responded favourably to the question

'Would equality of men and women in political life have a favourable effect on the equality of men and women in society in general?'

The pressure for 'parité' in France has thus come much more from the 'grass roots', from extra-parliamentary and extra-partisan sources than has the pressure for more equal representation of women in British political institutions. In Britain the initiative for all-women shortlists came from within the Labour Party and no movement or pressure group corresponding to the *Mouvement pour la parité* has developed in support of these all-women shortlists or of any other measures to increase women's representation in parliament.

---

<sup>1</sup>Editions du Seuil.

The 300 group which was set up to campaign for equal representation of women in parliament never succeeded in mobilizing public support or attracting media attention in the way that the *Mouvement pour la parité* has done in France. This difference may be attributed to specificities of British and French political culture: the French have shown themselves much more ready to demonstrate publicly for many causes than their British counterparts, but perhaps the British women's movement has something to learn from the *Mouvement pour la parité* and its success in bringing the issues of women's under-representation to the forefront of public debate and forcing it onto the public agenda.

The *Mouvement pour la parité* has received widespread support in France but there has also been opposition both from outside and within the feminist movement. One of the most outspoken critics of the *Mouvement* has been the feminist philosopher Elisabeth Badinter, for whom the idea of parity runs counter to Republican universalism. The theoretical foundations of any system of quotas for women, as well as the practical problems involved in implementing such a system must of course be a subject of debate. There is no room here to go into the details of such debates, suffice it to say that although the theoretical and practical debates over the notion of parity have by no means been won by either side, the fact that there has been such widespread debate not only over the practical implications of parity, but over the theoretical foundations which support it, has brought the issue to the attention of a large sector of the French population, and has allowed a much fuller discussion of the issues and problems involved than has been seen in Britain.

## The reaction of the political parties

The *Mouvement pour la parité* has been successful in attracting a lot of publicity and public support. The many public debates, demonstrations, newspaper articles and television and radio broadcasts devoted to the issue of parity have put the issue at the forefront of political debate, and have made it impossible for the major political parties not to react. The apparent depth of feeling in support of parity has prompted all the major parties with the notable exception of the Front National, to declare at least some degree of support for the idea of parity. The Communist Party and the Greens have gone the furthest in this support and formulated parliamentary bills in favour of parity, the Communists with a 'proposition de loi tendant à assurer une participation équilibrée des femmes et des hommes dans la vie publique' (April 1994)<sup>2</sup> and the Greens with a 'proposition de loi constitutionnelle instaurant la parité Femmes-Hommes', April 1995.<sup>3</sup>

The Socialist Party has declared itself in favour of parity and in September 1996 the Conseil National announced that 164 constituencies (one third) would be reserved for women candidates at the 1998 legislative elections. The implementation of this decree has not, however, been without problems. In the department of the Allier, for example, designated to present a woman candidate in at least one constituency, the constituency that has been chosen by the local party is that of Montluçon, where it will be difficult for a socialist candidate to beat the popular Communist mayor, Pierre Goldberg. Moreover, the local party affirms that it has

<sup>2</sup> Proposition of law tending to ensure an equal participation of women and men in public life.

<sup>3</sup> Proposition of constitutional law implementing parity between men and women.

had difficulties finding a woman to be their candidate.

The RPR-UDF has been more restrained in its support for *parité*. Following the early dismissal of eight of the twelve women ministers from his government, Alain Juppé set up an *Observatoire pour la parité* headed by the RPR deputy Roselyne Bachelot, which is charged with preparing a report and propositions to increase the representation of women. Critics, however, have derided this measure, indicating that the *Observatoire* is merely a way for Juppé to salve his conscience, and to avoid any concrete action in favour of parity. Whilst Alain Juppé has confirmed that he is prepared to call a referendum on the issue of parity, the only concrete measures so far announced have been a promise that at least a third of the RPR-UDF candidates in the 1998 regional elections will be women. Whilst announcing this measure, however, Patrick Stefani, the deputy general secretary of the RPR admitted that the number of women candidates his party would present at the next legislative elections would not be greatly augmented as they intended to give priority in nominating candidates to those who already held a seat.

French political parties have thus been forced to take a much more positive line on equal representation of men and women than their British counterparts. The battle, however, is far from won. If the parties have been forced to acknowledge the public pressure in support of parity and to make some kind of reforms towards more equal representation of women, it is still not clear that this will be enough to greatly increase the number of women deputies after the next legislative elections in 1988. Behind the declarations of good intentions it is clear that there is still strong resistance to any measures in favour of parity.

## **Will more women make a difference?**

Having examined the pressures in favour of a more equal representation of women in British and French political institutions, the question remains of whether a greater proportion of women in parliament and government would have a significant effect upon the functioning of these institutions and upon the British and French political cultures in general.

One obvious effect of having more women in parliament would be a normalization of feminine models of political power. This could be seen as one of the strongest arguments in favour of some form of quota of women in parliament, for the current situation in British and French political institutions reveals a type of vicious circle whereby the absence of women from positions of political power makes it very difficult to construct positive models of feminine power, whilst the lack of such models presents a symbolic barrier to the access of more women to posts of political power. The quasi-total absence of women from positions of political power perpetuates the idea that women do not have a place in the political world, an idea that is even more powerful a factor of exclusion as it is interiorised by women themselves.

But beyond this possible symbolic modification in the political sphere, what effects would a greater number of women have on the functioning of political institutions. French and British women politicians interviewed for this study frequently commented that they thought women had a different approach to politics than men. This difference manifested itself in women's motivations for entering

into politics, in their manner of conducting themselves in political debate and in their principal concerns and interests. The women interviewed often argued that they had chosen a career in politics not for the power and prestige attached to the role, but in order to achieve some concrete reforms. They generalised this observation to argue that women and men have a different relationship to power: women see political power as a means to an end whereas men see the obtention of political power as an end in itself. Edith Cresson is typical when she comments that,

‘For me, and for most women ministers I know, power is the possibility of modifying something which you think is wrong. For a man, power is showing off, driving around with motorcycles accompanying your car, and saying I’m a minister.’<sup>4</sup>

A second element that many women commented upon was their perception of themselves as less aggressive than men. Diana Maddock, for example, remarked that

‘I think we’re less confrontational than men and we like to get some kind of consensus and bring people round to going forward with agreement and enthusiasm. And men seem to enjoy the combative method rather better.’<sup>5</sup>

There is thus the idea that more women in parliament would lead to a less confrontational style of politics with more consensus both within and between the parties. Many women interviewed felt that a positive improvement to the functioning of parliament could be effected through the advent of more women with their less adversarial style of politics.

As well as differences in style, the women interviewed pointed to a difference in the content of their politics. That is to say that they expressed the opinion that they were more in touch with everyday life than men, and interested in concrete problems rather than abstract concepts like men. Huguette Bouchardeau, a socialist deputy, explains the origins of this approach by the fact that most women have another activity in life,

‘they take a much greater role in bringing up children, housework, and they occupy themselves much more with the problems of everyday life. Which means that when women arrive in posts of political responsibility they have what could be called a culture of everyday life.’<sup>6</sup>

These few comments indicate a general perception that women have a different relationship to politics from men, and that a greater number of women in parliament and government could change the face of political institutions in Britain and France.

But how should these claims that women will radically alter the functioning of our current political institutions be interpreted? The question of the existence or

---

<sup>4</sup>Interview 09.12.1993.

<sup>5</sup>Interview 01.11.1993.

<sup>6</sup>Interview 18.11.1992.

not of a separate 'feminine culture' which would change the face of politics throws us back to the old division between those who emphasise the role of masculine domination and induce from it a 'poverty' of feminine culture, and those who perhaps underestimate the effects of masculine domination and claim the intrinsic superiority of feminine culture in what could be called a kind of 'feminist populism'. Pierre Bourdieu, who represents the first category, argues that the positive values to which women could lay claim are in fact an illusion, the product of symbolic violence which is accomplished outside the control of consciousness and willing, 'in the obscurity of the practical schema of the habitus'.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, other theorists such as Carol Gilligan, for example, would argue that the specificity of feminine identity and culture cannot be deduced from the existence of masculine domination even if, in reality, the effects characteristic of this domination and the characteristics of a separate feminine culture overlap. A feminine culture which can even be considered superior to masculine culture<sup>8</sup> cannot thus be attributed merely to symbolic violence but exists independently of the structures of domination.

These two diametrically opposed approaches to the notion of a 'feminine culture' raise problems in our evaluation of women politicians' claims to a different approach to politics. Can we accept at face value the claims that women bring to politics a specifically feminine approach closer to the reality of everyday life, less concerned with the apparatus of power and more interested in practical and positive reforms. Should we, like Bourdieu, attribute these claims merely to the effects of masculine domination? Are women politician's affirmations that they view politics differently from their male colleagues merely an illusory component of the discourse of the dominated? Or can we accept at face value these claims of a different, and perhaps superior feminine approach to politics which could revolutionise and improve the functioning and results of political institutions if more women were represented in these institutions?

Many of the claims for *parité* in France, or for all-women shortlists in Britain rest on the presupposition that women will bring to politics something new and lacking. It is thus important to see how far this claim can be sustained. Perhaps, however, the debate over the nature of women's supposedly different approach is a misleading one. It is clear that the processes of masculine domination must play a role in shaping women's approach to politics and whether or not there is an intrinsically 'feminine' element involved in women's political culture, it can be argued that women will have a specific input into politics.

In a study of women's and men's conceptions of politics in France, Janine Mossuz-Lavau observed that

'the essential point which distinguishes men and women in their relationship to politics is that women have above all a sense of need (besoins) whereas men have more of a sense of constraint (contraintes).'<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup>P. Bourdieu, 'La domination masculine', *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 84, 1990.

<sup>8</sup>For Carol Gilligan the feminine ethic of care is superior to the abstract, masculine ethic of justice. C. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, Harvard University Press, 1982.

<sup>9</sup>J. Mossuz-Lavau, 'Les conceptions politiques des hommes et des femmes', in M. Riot-Sarcey (ed), *Democratie et Representation*, Kime, 1995.

Through their long-term domination of politics, and thus a greater political practice, men have better integrated the institutional and economic constraints involved, which can lead them to depreciate the changes it is possible to effect through political reform. Whereas women will give priority to the satisfaction of the needs they see without such careful regards to institutional and economic constraints involved in the satisfaction of those needs. One of the criticisms often levelled at women politicians has been their naïety and absence of economic sense – women have traditionally been relegated to social domains such as education because these are seen to be within their capabilities. So to suggest that women do have an approach which concerns itself more with people's needs and ignores the economic and institutional constraints involved in politics may be seen as merely reinforcing the old stereotypes which have served to exclude women from positions of political power and to suggest that women are less able politicians than men (if by a good 'politician' we mean someone able to take into account the mechanisms and relations of power which authorise decision making, to have recourse to the abstract, to notions which permit a 'political' analysis of daily reality). It is natural though that if women have been so long excluded from political power and decision making they should be less integrated into this type of 'political' thought and action than men. This does not imply that women have less to contribute to political institutions and indeed their approach may be what our institutions are lacking.

It is clearly impossible to predict exactly how a more equal representation of women would alter, if at all, our political institutions, and any claim for quotas for women cannot therefore be based on any absolute claim that women will improve the functioning of political institutions. There is, however, a general perception amongst women politicians themselves, and in public opinion that women do have something different to contribute to our political institutions, and any reforms that helped to bring about a more equal representation of women in these institutions would be welcomed.