

Is Democracy a Rule by and for Men?

Drude Dahlerup:

Demokrati uden Kvinder

Translated by the author from English “Has Democracy Failed Women?” Polity Press Ltd.

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Drude Dahlerup’s book “Has Democracy Failed Women?” elegantly introduces the reader to the academic and public debate concerning the representation of women in political institutions. Based on her own as well as other scholars work, Dahlerup analyzes and discusses the process of including women in the democracy from suffrage was first introduced until today. The book gives a historical as well as global perspective on the lack of inclusion of women in political institutions and decision-making processes, and thereby provides a gender perspective on one of the core issues within political science namely representation. Throughout the book, the focus is on how formal and informal institutions shape the inclusion process both by reproducing existing power relations, but also by creating change via the introduction of such mechanism as gender quotas.

What is representation?

What does it actually mean that women are represented in political institutions and decision-making

processes? In the book, Drude Dahlerup draws on the distinction between descriptive and substantive representation. Descriptive representation concerns the presence of women in political bodies, and is thus a question of the number or share of women in legislative bodies. Substantive representation is a question of whether representatives actually represents the interests of women.

Descriptive representations (referred to as numeric or social representation in the Danish version of the book), is the focus in the first part of the book (chapters 1-3), where the author discuss the development in the share of women in parliaments through time and across countries. The global perspective is particularly interesting, because it illustrates how progress towards gender parity in parliaments can be assisted by institutional arrangements such as gender quotas. Some “young democracies” in the global south have succeeded in reaching a high numeric representation of women in parliaments much faster than the “old democracies” questioning the idea of the “step-by-step model” where the representation of women

slowly increases over time. Instead, these young democracies represent a “fast-track-model” where the introduction of gender quotas have supported the process of including women in political institutions. Drude Dahlerup further devotes a chapter about the effect of gender quotas and provides a thorough introduction to the various types of quota systems that exists and discusses their effects on the numeric representation of women in political institutions.

Representing women’s interests

In the latter part of the book, Drude Dahlerup address the issue of substantive representation and the relation between descriptive representation and substantive representation. This is a central debate in the literature on gender and politics not only because it relates to fundamental theoretical discussions about the ontological status of “gender” and “woman”, but also because it is – on a less abstract level - a question of whether descriptive representation matters. Do female politicians promote the interest of the female constituency?

Drude Dahlerup raises some interesting and crucial questions in this part of the book: Does it make sense to talk about women’s interests? Is it possible for women across ideological standpoints to find common ground and promote women’s interests? What are the dangers of gender mainstreaming and the bureaucratization of gender equality policies? The author analyze and discuss these questions based on the literature, and

her argumentation is clear and convincing. However, I think the book would have benefitted from elaborating further on the current political events such as the MeToo-movement (which is briefly mentioned) and how anti-feminist movements shape the debate of women’s interest and collaboration across political boundaries.

A democratic deficit

Drude Dahlerup concludes the book by arguing that we still have a democratic deficit when it comes to the representation of women and minorities today. Women are still under-represented in political institutions and in higher positions within political organizations. Moreover, she argues that current political events (such as Trump being elected and the rise of anti-feminist movements) also remind us that “backlash” can occur.

Overall, the book introduces the reader to the issue of women’s inclusion in the political sphere in an easily accessible manner, and covers the historical as well as global aspects of the topic. Drude Dahlerup shifts between presenting and discussing research findings and providing small stories from her own work as an international consultant and researcher. This combination works very well, and “brings life” to the many tables of the book. It is therefore an obvious book for higher education students dealing with issues of political representations as well as equality and diversity, but could also be of interest to a broader audience following debates on gender equality and quota systems.