

# Blair's Babes:

# Critical Mass Theory, Gender, and Legislative Life

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**Synopsis**: The entry of the cohort of 'Blairs babes' into public life provides an ideal test case of whether, and under what conditions, women leaders in elected office have the capacity to 'make a substantive difference'. Part I outlines the theoretical framework based on critical mass theory. Part II describes the data and measures, including the British Representation Study survey of 1000 candidates and members conducted in the 2001 general election. Part III examines the evidence for party and gender differences concerning five scales measuring attitudes and values that commonly divide British party politics.

The study suggests that once we control for party, there are no significant differences among women and men leaders across three of the value scales, including those concerning the free market economy, the European scale and the moral traditionalism scale. Yet on the two scales that are most closely related to women's interests – namely the affirmative action and the gender equality scales – women and men leaders differ significantly within each party, even after controlling for other common social background variables such as their age, education, and income. The conclusion summarizes the main findings and considers why this matters for the composition of parliament, the public policy agenda and for women's roles as political leaders.

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In June 1997, the entry of 120 women members into the British parliament, double the number elected in 1992, raised expectations about the role of women as legislative leaders and the capacity of this development to alter the predominant policy agenda at Westminster, the tone of parliamentary debate, and the representation of women's interests in public life. Feminist theorists suggest that the presence of women offers possibilities for the articulation of women's perspectives and issues (Phillips 1995; Lovenduski 1997). Yet within a few months popular commentary quickly shifted towards a more critical tone, suggesting that initial hopes failed to be realized (Perkins 1999). Far from altering parliament, 'Blair's Babes', as they were dubbed by the tabloid press, appeared more quiescent towards the leadership, less willing to rebel, and therefore unlikely to make a distinctive contribution to the public policy agenda (Cowley and Childs 2001; Thomson 1999).

But did the entry of a critical mass of women MPs in the 1997 election, and their subsequent re-election in 2001, alter the predominant Westminster culture in terms of political attitudes and values? The entry of the cohort of 'Blairs babes' into public life provides an ideal test case of whether, and under what conditions, women leaders in elected office have the capacity to 'make a substantive difference'. Part I outlines the theoretical framework based on critical mass theory. Part II describes the data and measures, including the British Representation Study survey of 1000 candidates and members conducted in the 2001 general election. Part III examines the evidence for party and gender differences concerning five scales measuring attitudes and values that commonly divide British party politics. The results suggest that once we control for party, there are no significant differences among women and men leaders across three of the value scales, including those measuring support for the Free Market economy, the European scale and the Traditional Moral values scale. Yet on the two scales that are most closely related to women's interests – namely the affirmative action and the gender equality scales – women and men differ significantly within each party, even after controlling for other common social variables such as age, education and income. The conclusion summarizes the main findings and considers why this matters for the composition of parliament, the public policy agenda and for women's roles as political leaders.

# I: Theoretical Framework

Critical mass theory, derived loosely from nuclear physics, suggests that nuclear reaction can be a contained process. Beyond a certain point, however, when enough uranium is assembled, an irreversible meltdown can occur, representing an unstoppable chain reaction of nuclear fission multiplying upon itself, producing an impact far beyond the quantity of the original material.

When applied to social science, the theory of critical mass suggests that the nature of group interactions depend upon size. When a group remains a distinct minority within a larger society, its members will seek to adapt to their surroundings, conforming to the predominant rules of the game. In many ways this is analogous to Noelle-Neuman's (1984) spiral of silence theory about the expression of dissonant views. But once the group reaches a certain size, critical

mass theory suggests that there will be a qualitative change in the nature of group interactions, as the minority starts to assert itself and thereby transform the institutional culture, norms and values. Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977) applied this account to gender relations in industrial corporations, identifying four categories. *Uniform* groups contain only men or women. *Skewed* groups contain a large imbalance of men or women, up to about 15 per cent of the minority group. *Titled* groups contain about 15-40 percent of the opposite sex. Lastly, *balanced* groups contain 40-50 percent of each sex.

This theory can also be applied to the position of women in public office. Drude Dahlerup (1988) and Jill M. Bystydenski (1992) have argued that if women and men politicians differ in their underlying values, policy priorities and legislative styles, then when parliaments shift from skewed to tilted, or even balanced, groups there will be a transformation in the institutional culture, political discourse, and policy agenda. The expectations are implicit in Clare Short's claims: "As more women come into the Commons, the culture will change, the agenda of politics will broaden, and the institution itself will be transformed." (Quoted in McDougal 1998). This theory suggests that in the past, we would expect few substantive differences between women and men MPs at Westminster, since, until recently, there have been so few female representatives. Previous research on parliamentary candidates and MPs in the 1992 and 1997 elections found that when compared with men within each party, women were slightly more supportive of feminist and leftwing values, expressed stronger concern about social policy issues, and gave higher priority to constituency casework. Yet in all cases the gender gap was modest, and overall it was political party rather than gender that proved the strongest predictor of values and attitudes (Norris and Lovenduski 1995; Norris 1996; Norris 2000).

Has this situation changed by the entry of a new cohort of women politicians? The 1997 British general election saw the proportion of women MPs doubling overnight, from 9.2 to 18.2 percent of the House of Commons (see Figure 1). There were also substantial increases in the proportion of women in other offices in public life, including in the cabinet, local government, the reformed House of Lords, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. The 2001 election saw a modest erosion in the number of women in the Commons, (down from 120 to 118 MPs) rather than further gains, due to the abandonment of Labour's All-Women shortlist policy in half their target seats (Lovenduski 2001). Nevertheless the 1997 intake provides an ideal test case for critical mass theory, since in the British parliament women shifted from being a 'skewed' to a 'tilted' group. In Kantor's terms, the change was from a token number towards a minority strong enough to affect the nature of the wider group. Members of tilted groups are able to form alliances and act as a coherent force to affect the dominant culture of their institution and in a position to perform the 'critical' acts that Dahlerup (1988) argues are necessary to the feminization of political institutions.

This issue is important, not just for our understanding, but also for the current policy debate about proposed legislation allowing parties to introduce affirmative action strategies. Recognizing the lack of sustained progress, Labour

has pledged to introduce this reform in the current parliament. But whether parties will take advantage of this legislation depends upon their predominant culture and how far they favor such measures. Much of the popular rhetoric supporting the selection of more women candidates prior to 1997 stressed that, although there is a clear case to be made on the grounds of equity alone, in addition the entry of more women into Westminster would help to change the mainstream policy agenda, and the 'public school/boys club' atmosphere of Commons debate. A popular argument in favor of positive discrimination for women was that the new intake of female members would raise different types of concerns in the Commons, as well as in the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the European parliament (see the discussion in Brooks, Eagle and Short 1990; Perrigo 1996; Phillips 1995; Short 1996; MacDougal 1998). Moreover qualitative interviews with half the newly elected Labour women MPs in 1997 found that two-thirds identified as feminists, expressing support for the values of women's autonomy and equality, suggesting that there might be the potential for the articulation of a distinctive voice in parliament (Childs 2001a, 201b). Other evidence suggests that although women MPs have not revolutionized the House of Commons, nor been roll-call rebels, behind the scenes many women MPs have worked effectively to secure reforms (Lovenduski 2001).

#### Figure 1 about here

Despite extensive popular interest, and some qualitative studies, so far little previous research has examined the systematic evidence concerning the impact of women as legislative leaders in Britain. The theory of a critical mass depends upon the existence of underlying differences in the values, attitudes and behavior of the groups concerned. If women and men MPs are similar in these regards, then even if women gradually became the majority at Westminster, British parliamentary politics will continue in familiar ways. The public face of politics will change more than the political culture and the substantive policy agenda. Critical mass theory can only operate if female politicians differ significantly from men, for example if they give greater priority to public spending on education rather than defense, or if they raise more parliamentary questions about childcare than about Europe, or if they pay more attention to constituency service rather than parliamentary debate. While some studies suggest that women do make a distinct contribution to the policy agenda in legislatures elsewhere, such as in North America, Western Europe and Scandinavia, the evidence remains under debate (see for example, discussions in Thomas 1994; Karvonen and Selle 1996; Tremblay 1998), and it remains unclear whether similar findings could be expected to operate in the context of the British parliament, an institution where strong party discipline and established traditions might be expected to predominate over the independence of backbench MPs.

# II: Data and Methods

In the light of these debates, this study analyzes the cohort of women political leaders who entered in the 1997 general election to see whether they have made a substantive difference to Westminster politics. Evidence to test this claim is available from 2001 British Representation Studies (BRS), a mail survey sent to all parliamentary candidates and MPs standing in the British general election for

all parties with parliamentary representation.

In early spring 2001, before the official campaign got underway, the BRS was mailed to 1,859 candidates selected by the main British parties (excluding the Greens, BNP, UK Independence party, and other minor parties or independent candidates without parliamentary representation). In total 1085 politicians had replied by the end of June 2001, representing a response rate of 58.4 percent (for full details and the questionnaires see www.pippanorris.com). Although the response rate was (as usual) higher among parliamentary candidates than MPs, the study includes about one third of the current House of Commons, and it is broadly representative by party. The results can be compared with other surveys in this series, the 1997 British Representation Study (BRS-97) (N. 999), and the 1992 British Candidate Study (N.1658) (for full methodological details of previous research see Norris and Lovenduski 1995). Initial analysis of the results in terms of patterns of party ideology is available elsewhere (Norris and Lovenduski 2001).

This study focuses on whether women and men politicians differ within each party in terms of their political attitudes and values, including towards major economic, social and foreign policy issues commonly dividing British party politics and explicitly gendered issues such as abortion and equal opportunities for women.

The BRS contains multiple items measuring political attitudes and values, with most derived from long-standing questions contained in the British Election Study. Principal component factor analysis with varimax rotation was used to examine the underlying ideological dimensions in responses to 26 items. The results in Table 1 show the items fell into five dimensions that divided British politicians, reflecting attitudes towards the classic left-right dimension of support for the free market economy, affirmative action towards women, liberal gender equality, Europe, and moral traditionalism. The factor analysis accounted for over half (58.8%) of the variance in attitudes towards these items.

[Table 1 about here]

# III: Results and Analysis

Differences in the mean scores on these scales among women and men within each party are shown in Table 2. The results show that once we control for party, there are almost no significant differences in the values of women and men leaders concerning the scales measuring support for free market left-right economic values, attitudes towards Britain's role in the European Union, and moral traditionalism. The only exception concerns the economic values of Labour women that tend to be significantly more moderate than their male colleagues. In all these regards there is no support for any claims that women leaders can be expected to be consistently more liberal or more conservative than men towards issues like crime, censorship, or the redistribution of income. Nor are they more 'internationalist' in orientation towards the EU.

# [Table 2 about here]

Yet the results also show that on two scales, -- both of which are directly related to women's interests, -- there is a strong and significant gender gap within all the major parties. One concerns the scale measuring attitudes towards affirmative action, such as support for all women shortlists, reserved seats, or positive quotas to get more women candidates nominated. In some ways this gender difference is not surprising within the Labour party, since this reflects the prevalent ethos, but the fact that there is a significant gender gap on this issue within the Conservative party is both striking and unexpected. There are also consistent gender differences towards the scale measuring 'liberal' gender equality, reflecting issues such as support for equal opportunities for women, the availability of abortion, and for equality in the workplace and home.

# [Table 3 about here]

Table 3 uses multivariate analysis to see whether these patterns are due to factors such as the incumbency status, education, income and age of women and men leaders. Among the different factors predicting attitudes, age is important, with younger politicians more favorable towards both affirmative action and gender equality. Nevertheless the results confirm that the gender gap continues to be significant even with these controls, suggesting that it reflects deep-seated attitudinal differences between women and men leaders.

# [Figures 2 and 3 about here]

The scatter plot shown in Figure 2 illustrates the map of party politics towards these two dimensions. The results show that the Conservative party remains most opposed to affirmative action, and often unfavorable towards equal opportunities for women, as shown by the cluster of Conservative politicians in the top-right hand corner. In contrast, Labour leaders are clustered in the bottom-right hand corner, indicating the greatest support for gender equality on these scales. Interestingly, the Liberal Democrats appear to be scattered across the map on these scales, overlapping with both the major parties, rather than more closely associated with the Labour position. Lastly there is a scatter of outliers, with one or two Conservative and Labour politicians clearly out of step with the predominant ethos within their respective parties.

The analysis can be further disaggregated by breaking down the position of women and men leaders within each party, as shown in Figure 3. The results vividly illustrate the gender gap we have documented on these scales, with women tending to be clustered in the bottom-right corner (pro-affirmative action and equal opportunities for women) in each party, and male leaders in the opposite corner, with some exceptions.

# Conclusions: Why does this issue matter?

It is a familiar observation that the type of people elected as political leaders has changed over time. If the gender of politicians influences their attitudes and behavior, this change may have four significant consequences:

- (i) For the pool of political leaders: MPs constitute the pool from which all elected political leaders – including members of the government and the opposition front benches - is drawn. Changes in the composition of parliament may ultimately be expected to percolate up to the highest offices of state.
- (ii) For the House of Commons: The most direct effects may be in legislative activities where backbenchers have considerable autonomy, such as in the choice of Parliamentary Questions or Private Members Bills. But elected leaders play a much wider role in developing and debating public policy, in shaping and revising legislation, in scrutinizing the actions of government departments, and in linking voters and government. Parliament operates within a wider context than simply lawmaking.
- (iii) For party policy: Perhaps most importantly, there may be an impact on the direction of party policy. Conservative MPs help determine the choice of party leader, while Labour MPs help select the leader and shadow cabinet. Parliamentarians play a leading role in determining official party policy, as well as shaping the nature of the party image.
- (iv) For public perceptions of representative democracy: Lastly, there may be a significant impact on trust in the political system and confidence in representative democracy, if voters feel they are most effectively represented by 'someone like themselves'.

This limited study focuses on differences between women and men politicians in terms of their attitudes and values, which represents only one dimension of legislative life. Other research forthcoming from the 2001 BRS will examine alternative dimensions, including gender differences towards the policy issue agenda and legislative priorities; perceptions of legislative leadership roles and activities; and the social background of members prior to legislative life. Moreover this study has not yet examined trends over time and the changes that can be analyzed based on the 1992 and 1997 surveys in the same series.

The preliminary results of this initial analysis confirm the body of previous work suggesting that the entry of more women into Westminster will not generate a radical revolution in the predominant culture at Westminster, as the more optimistic scenarios suggested, but nor are there grounds to believe that the entry of more women into Westminster merely led to 'politics as usual'. Instead the evidence consistently suggests that women leaders in all the major British parties (not just Labour) do bring a different set of values to issues affecting women's equality, in the workplace, home, and public sphere. If these attitudes are translated into party manifestos, political debate and ultimately legislative action, for example by shaping policies towards equal pay, reproductive rights, and the adoption of affirmative action strategies in the recruitment of women within parties, then the entry of more women leaders into Westminster has the capacity to make more than simply a symbolic difference.

Table 1. Factor Analysis of Political	0,				
	Free A	Affirmative	Liberal		
	Market	Action	Gender	-	Traditionalism
	Economy		Equality		
Big business benefits owners at	.822				
worker's expense					
Ordinary people do not get their fair	.799				
share of wealth					
Management will always try to get the	.798				
better of employees					
There is one law for rich, one for poor	.793				
Government should redistribute wealth					
All women short-lists		.818			
Reserved seats for women		.805			
Positive quotas/affirmative action for		.791			
women		.771			
Opinion on gender quotas		665			
Financial support for women		.649			
candidates		.049	,		
Men better suited for politics than			.733		
-			./33		
women			711		
Husbands job is to earn money, wife's			.711		
is at home			(70		
Family life suffers when wife has full-			.679		
time job			(07		
Should Parliament have more women			607		
MPs?					
Government should ensure that women	1		522		
have equal chances					
Attempts to give equal opportunities to	)		.491		
women					
Opinion on single European Currency				.757	
Long-term policy on the EU should be				.742	
Feel about Britain's membership in the				.741	
EU					
Schools should teach children to obey					.617
authority					
Censorship is necessary to uphold					.611
moral standards					
The law should be obeyed even if					.584
wrong					
Young people lack respect for					.584
traditional values					
People who break law given stiffer				428	.546
sentences					
Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as					.409
working for pay					
Availability of abortion on the NHS					
% Variance Explained	34.9	8.3	6.7	4.8	3.9
Extraction Method: Principal Compon	ent Analys	515. RO	iation M	emoa:	Varimax with

#### Table 1: Factor Analysis of Political Ideology

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. Rotation converged in 7 iterations. Coefficients less than .40 were excluded.

Source: British Representation Study 2001

PARTY	Gender	N.	Free Market economy scale	Affirmative Action Scale	Liberal Gender Equality	Europe Scale	Moral Traditionalism Scale
					Scale		
Con	Male	194		.50	48	.73	
	Female	38	.99	.17	.34	.95	61
	Eta(sig)		.07	.18***	.27***	.09	.09
Lab	Male	165	57	35	.28	.01	.05
	Female	58	03	-1.34	.49	.14	.17
	Eta		.29***	.43***	.12*	.07	.05
Lib Dem	Male	189	29	.30	02	73	.26
	Female	55	10	46	.32	56	.12
	Eta		.10	.34***	.17***	.10	.06
Nat	Male	75	76	.17	23	29	.43
	Female	14	57	53	.15	42	.26
	Eta		.11	.28**	.13	.06	.07

Table 2: Mean scores on ideological scales by party and gender

Note: The figures represent the mean score on the ideological scales by party and gender, without any controls. See Table 1 for the items in these scales. The difference between groups is measured by ANOVA and the strength of association coefficient is Eta. Significance P. \*\*\*=.01 \*\*=.05 \*.10. Due to the smaller number of cases, 'Nat' combines members of the SNP and Plaid Cymru parties.

Source: British Representation Study 2001

Uns	tandardized	Standardized	t	Sig.	
	Coefficients	Coefficients		Ū	
	B Std. Error		Beta		
(Constant)	.47	.30		1.58	.12
Gender	74	.08	31	-9.66	.00
Year of birth	.01	.00	.06	1.70	.09
MP elected in 2001	08	.05	06	-1.69	.09
CON	.43	.13	.20	3.26	.00
LAB	51	.13	23	-3.93	.00
LIB DEM	.14	.13	.06	1.10	.27
Total hsehold income	01	.01	03	97	.33
Education	.06	.05	.04	1.14	.26
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.277				

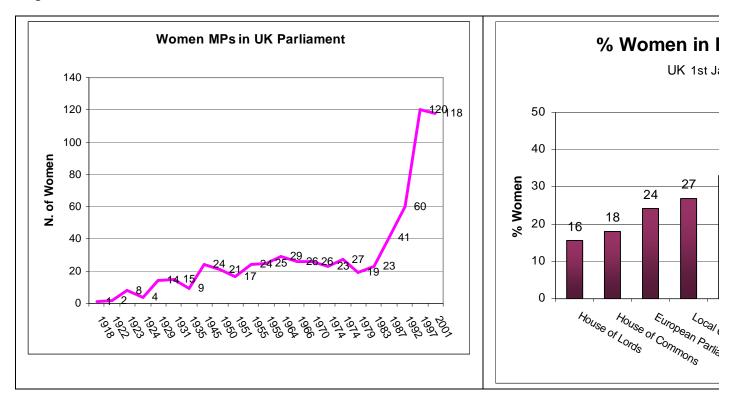
# Table 3: Regression model predicting support for affirmative action scale

Note: Dependent Variable: Affirmative Action Scale Source: British Representation Study 2001

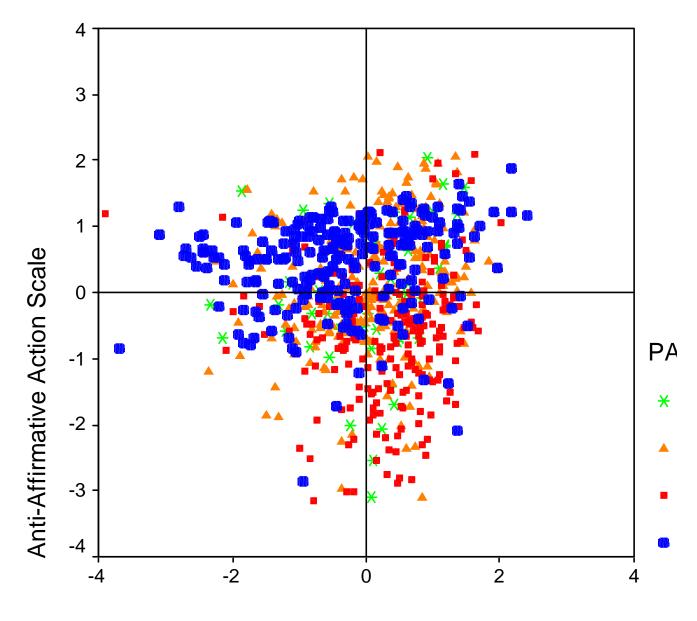
#### Table 4: Regression model predicting support for affirmative action scale

	Unstandardized		Standardized	t	Sig.
	Coefficients		Coefficients		_
	BS	BStd. Error			
(Constant)	-2.09	.32		-6.47	.00
Gender	.45	.08	.19	5.37	.00
Year of birth	.02	.00	.22	6.22	.00
MP elected in 2001	.03	.05	.02	.56	.57
CON	23	.14	11	-1.65	.10
LAB	.44	.14	.20	3.13	.00
LIB DEM	.25	.14	.12	1.83	.07
Total hsehold income	.03	.02	.07	1.72	.09
Education	01	.05	01	27	.79
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.136				

Note: Dependent Variable: Liberal Gender Equality Scale Source: British Representation Study 2001 BLAIR'S BABES ~ NORRIS AND LOVENDUSKI. DRAFT #1 ~ 4817 WORDS Figure 1: Women in Public Office, UK 9/25/2001 4:06 PM



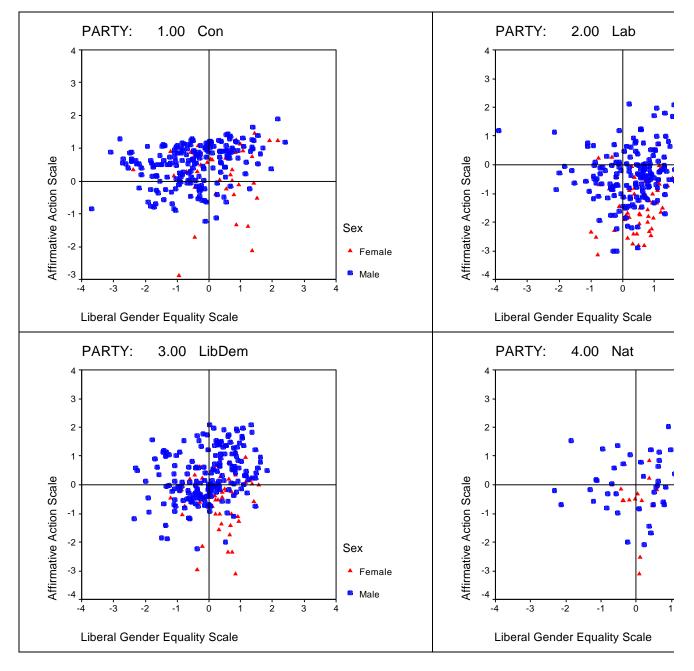
BLAIR'S BABES ~ NORRIS AND LOVENDUSKI.DRAFT #1 ~ 4817 WORDS9/25/2001 4:06 PMFigure 2: Attitudes towards Affirmative Action and Gender Equality Scales by Party



Liberal Gender Equality Scale

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 Figure 3: Attitudes towards Affirmative Action and Gender Equality by Gender and Party



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