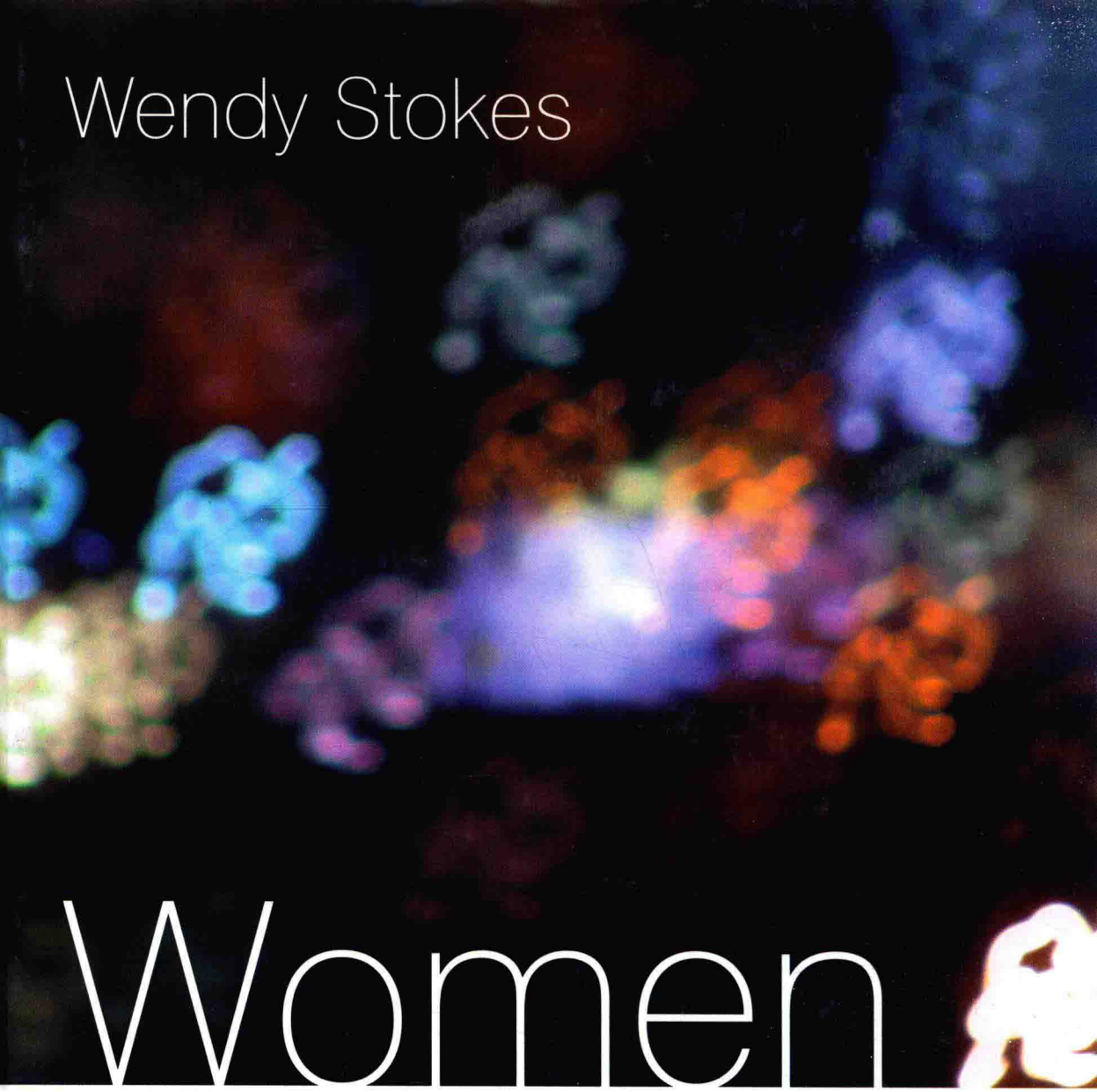
Wendy Stokes



Women in Contemporary Politics

Women in Contemporary Politics

Wendy Stokes

Polity

First published in 2005 by Polity Press

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK.

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

ISBN 0-7456-2498-7
ISBN 0-7456-2499-5 (pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 10 on 12 pt Times
by SNP Best-set Typesetter Ltd, Hong Kong
Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin Cornwall

For further information on Polity, visit our website: www.polity.co.uk

Women in Contemporary Politics

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Data doesn't hang around on websites waiting to be transferred to the pages of books like this: people go out and collect it. Having done so, they use it to construct and support theories, to write articles and books, and even to add to the sum of available information through websites. This book and I therefore owe a huge debt to all the people, primarily but not exclusively women, who have spent imagination, time and effort collecting and analysing the information about women in politics that is pulled together here. An even larger debt is owed to all the women who have broken paths and stormed bastions in order to achieve their goals, especially those who in so doing have made it a little easier for those who are following them.

One of the articles referred to below describes the difficulties of implementing the 33 per cent reserved seats for women policy in India's panchayats (local government). It describes how one woman, having been elected to a leadership position, found that the chair occupied by her predecessor had been removed: she was to sit on the floor as was the custom for women in her area; she was not to sit on a chair and get above herself. The woman refused to initiate proceedings until the chair was returned and, eventually, in the face of much ill will, she was successful, and the chair was reinstated. The small step of getting to sit on a chair was an achievement of breath-taking significance; each of the small steps described in the following chapters has been bought at great cost, but when they are put together, we can see how far we have come.

One last thing that has emerged as I have been writing this: all the people I have been following, the politicians and the researchers, have worked hard and made sacrifices – but they have also had fun. Women's entry into politics is revolutionary, but as Emma Goldman may have said, 'if I can't dance at it, it's not my revolution!'

The people who read the first draft of this book made valuable suggestions which I hope I have incorporated. Specific thanks are due to Valerie Bryson, Julia Buxton, Sarah Childs, Emma Clarence, Julian Clark, Juliet Landau-Pope, David Miller, Anne Phillips, Vicky Randall, Anne Showstack Sassoon, Debbie Williams, Louise Knight, Jean van Altena, Sarah Dancy and the staff at Polity, and, last but not least, all the members of the Women in Politics Specialist Group. Thanks also to the colleagues, family and friends who have put up with me as I bored for Britain on the finer points of the Ukrainian electoral system!

CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

INTRODUCTION

> To include women's concerns, to represent women in the public life of our society, might well lead to a profound redefinition of the nature of public life itself.
>
> Diamond and Hartsock 1975: 721

With some accuracy the twentieth century has been referred to as 'the democratic century'. The notion of popular self-rule, held in contempt for hundreds of years, had become, by the end of the century, the only respectable way of legitimating government. In the course of the century, feudal traditions disappeared, empires dissolved, and newly independent peoples and states emerged, the vast majority of which defined themselves in terms of the popular will. This tidal wave of democracy was driven by a current of civic equality: equality of citizenship regardless of class, caste, religion, language, ethnicity and sex.

The twentieth century witnessed a sustained attack on systems of 'natural' hierarchy, privilege and dominance. Despite resistance and backlash, there is now a global language of equal value and respect, to which we all nod. Extensive lip-service notwithstanding, the issue of equality between men and women remains problematic in ways that no longer pertain (in most of the world) to equality between people from different religious, language or ethnic groups. This is to claim not that equality between such groups has been achieved, but that statements of natural inequality and discriminatory practices are regarded as indisputably wrong by majority opinion (even if they are tolerated). When it comes to men and women, the problem of 'nature' has not been so happily resolved. The 'naturalness' of gender characteristics, particularly those of women, is constantly used to legitimate practices and explain away situations.

If a group was made up of more-or-less equal proportions of two or more ethnic or religious groups, yet the governing body was hugely dominated by people from just one of the groups, this would generally be regarded as a scandal. Yet, when the same thing occurs, and the groups concerned are men and women, not only is there no outcry – in fact, quite the opposite: it is regarded as normal.

Whether we are talking about the government of a nation, the board of directors of a company, the trustees of a charity, the governing body of a university, or the judges of a film festival, the relative absence of women goes largely unremarked.[1] When attention is drawn to such a deficit, the response is along the lines of, either, there were no women with the appropriate training/background/qualifications, or no women put themselves forward. This is what Norris and Lovenduski have referred to as supply/demand-side explanations, and both rely on underlying notions of women's natural characteristics.

The first type of explanation assumes that certain characteristics are required for the job, that these are held only by people with a particular background, and that it is not the fault of those setting the criteria if only men ever seem to acquire that background. The second type of explanation recognizes that fewer women put themselves forward for the job than men, but assumes that this is because women are either uninterested, unable to fit the job into their pre-existing commitments, or unable to see themselves in this particular role. In either case, the resulting situation of unequal representation is seen not as a problem of the job description, or the limited vision of those making the appointments, but as a problem of gender: women either don't fit, or won't make the effort. Moreover, this is not deemed a stumbling block to the legitimacy of the whole project any more than it is regarded as discriminatory on the part of those making the appointments: it is just a natural outcome of natural difference.

The low number of women present on most decision-making bodies in the world is a scandal. It is a scandal now for exactly the same reason that the total exclusion of women from civil rights was deplored in eighteenth-century Europe by Mary Wollstonecraft: if democracy is defined by equal citizenship, then you cannot explain unequal outcomes in terms of 'natural' inequalities. When it comes to citizenship, there is no such thing: either we are all equal, or we don't have a democracy. In so far as we are different from each other – and we are different on a range of measures, including physical ability and amount of daily responsibility for other people – the institutions of democracy should accommodate us, rather than the reverse: because WE are the democracy, not the institutions that have been built to serve us.

This book exists to correct a deficit: the relative absence of discussion of women in politics textbooks. It owes its genesis to the imagination of the editors at Polity, the wisdom of Professor Anne Phillips, and the sloppy methodology of a certain group of writers. Anne Phillips used to run a course on women and politics at London Guildhall University. In the first week she set her students the task of finding in the politics texts that they had been using in their studies so far an example of research that was wrong or misleading because it either omitted all reference to women or assumed that women and men would behave in the same way. As Anne's teaching assistant, I found the textbook *Politics UK*.

Politics UK is in many ways an admirable book: it is clearly written, comprehensive in scope, and accurate in detail. It fails, however, to interrogate any differences in participation or citizenship between men and women. It makes the assumption that we are all equal citizens, and that any differences in outcome are the effect of individual differences between us as people, rather than structural differences in gendered citizenship. Therefore, in the discussion of poverty, it is 'people' who are poor, and the well-documented feminization of poverty is not referred to, let alone shown to be caused by gendered policy-making. The relatively low number of women in Parliament is noted as a fact, but not investigated as a failure of party and parliamentary democracy. Local councillors,

Members of the European Parliament, civil servants and so on are just that: our unsexed representatives.

Two questions arise: Does it matter that the literature overlooks this aspect of representation? And is this representational blip itself of any importance? My answer to both questions is an unequivocal yes. If we are concerned about democracy, an apparent anomaly in the area of representation demands investigation and comment. No taxation without representation was a key demand of the eighteenth century when modern democracy erupted, and arguments ever since have made it plain that representation means more than just being allowed to vote every four or five years: it means the real opportunity to participate actively in policy-making and implementation at all levels. Checking and criticizing the working of our democracies is the job of researchers in the field: we have been keen enough to tabulate the backgrounds of MPs and business people in order to demonstrate their privileged, elite characteristics, and to speculate on what this networking to the exclusion of the less privileged and working classes might mean; equivalent discussions of the exclusion of women have been the monopoly of feminist writers and texts.

Does the relative absence of women matter? Three dimensions in which it might matter spring to mind. First, equal opportunities: current thought about discrimination in employment is that if a significant section of the society is absent from any area, then there is a high probability that discrimination is taking place. While political office is not exactly a job, the same rule can be taken to apply. Second, best value: if significant sectors of the population are not being included in important areas of policy- and decision-making for reasons other than ability, it is possible that we as a community are not being served by the most talented of our citizens. Third, if distinct groups are absent from the political process, it is possible that their interests are not being served, or that their insights are not being included.

The first two of these considerations, equal opportunities and getting the best people, are arguments used generally in the promotion of equal access. The third is perhaps particular to the public sphere. Democratic politics is not like anything else. It is the sphere of complex human relations in which the good of each is balanced against the good of all in a multiplicity of decisions about ends and means. Good decisions depend on good input (as all data analysts know, GIGO: garbage in, garbage out). To make and successfully implement good policies, good information about lives, desires, values, beliefs, aspirations and behaviours is necessary. In order to have this, the whole population has to be involved in the process.

According to a limited view of democracy, the political process can (and should) be professionalized. Professional politicians governed by the rules of their institutions seek information, generate policies, and then put those policies up for the population to accept or reject through voting for one party or another at an election. Citizen input amounts to accepting or rejecting the options on offer. The broader view of democracy demands far higher levels of participation by as much of the citizenry as can bear it, in order both to make good policies and to encourage the development of democratic abilities in the population.

Either way, the quality of the input depends on who is included in the process, and it takes little imagination to see that the narrower the range of types of people, backgrounds and experiences included, the narrower the vision of the policies. In the UK there is an apocryphal story of a Minister for Transport who, when caught in a dispute about cost

and quality of public transport in London, asked his secretary to book him a ticket on the Underground. Lack of direct experience can, of course, be compensated for. We are not, however, always aware of the things we *don't* know, especially if the knowledge we lack is linked to a set of experiences deriving from social or economic position.

Which is a long way of saying that we do not know whether it matters if women (or any other social group whose members share distinct characteristics among themselves and not with the wider population) are present or absent from politics. Having rarely had parity between men and women in politics, we cannot know whether it would be any different from what we have now. That being the case, we cannot assume that the present disproportion is not a problem.

This book attempts to plug one gap: the absence of information and discussion of women's political roles from the mainstream literature. In so doing, it aspires to play a small part in plugging the other gap: women's actual absences. By making this discussion part of the mainstream, it just might cause more of us to question what we take for granted and exert pressure for change.

Some Definitions

Feminist political theorists, women's movement activists, and researchers investigating women's lives have had a profound impact on the study of politics. They were instrumental in the extension of the discipline from its traditional focus on parliaments and parties to include more diverse and diffuse phenomena such as social movements and *ad hoc* local campaigns. More specifically, feminist scholarship insisted that 'the political' was an even broader category. Working from a critique of the public/private dichotomy, they argued that the content of the private world (particularly the family, social relationships, and the economy and workplace) was also politicized.[2]

As a result of this reassessment of the extent of politics, many books addressing the issue of women and politics work with a broad canvas, covering the family, work, women's movements, social policy and participation in formal politics. This book breaks with this pattern. The 'politics' of the title is politics narrowly conceived: parliaments and parties. It does this to meet a deficit: the standard texts used on politics courses do not pay enough (if any) attention to women, and the texts that are devoted to women are either very broad in scope, or quite specific (concerned only with women's participation in political parties in one country, for example).[3]

A second critique to emerge from feminist scholarship questions whether it is possible to use the term 'women' to describe a category of people that has any real consistency. After the initial surge of second-wave feminism in the 1960s, women settled down and started to examine themselves, the movements and each other. Fraught tensions and some bitter conflicts were revealed. These included (but were by no means limited to) those between classes, races, ethnicities and women from different parts of the world. Working-class women characterized feminism as middle-class; black women claimed it was essentially white in its concerns; women from less-developed and what were then Communist countries condemned its interests as a function of privilege; lesbians argued that it was heterosexist; mothers that it was matriphobic . . . From the sometimes ugly bickering, a