Analysing the “what” and “when” of women’s substantive representation: the role of right-wing populist party ideology

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ABSTRACT
Existing scholarship underscores the contested nature of the relationship between women’s representation and right-wing parties. This article contributes to this literature by examining women’s substantive representation in Poland under the right-wing populist Law and Justice government from 2015 to 2019. It is specifically concerned with the “what” and “when” of substantive representation: while the former deals with various women’s issues, the latter concerns the conversion of issues into policies. Using representation theory and refined partisan theory, this article sheds light on gendered representation, an issue often overlooked in the scholarly literature on women and politics in Central and Eastern Europe.

The study of women’s representation is warranted. Calls for increased representation of women are supported by several justice and equality arguments (e.g. Lovenduski 2005; Phillips 1995; Mansbridge 1999). Moreover, it is believed that the presence of women in political institutions can bring attention to women’s concerns in policy-making and policy output (see Krook and Childs 2010). While much of the existing literature on women and politics shows a positive correlation between feminist representation and the presence of leftist parties, more research is needed on the parties of the right (see Erzeel and Celis 2016). Several scholars have pointed out that conservative women’s participation in electoral politics is increasing, whether as party members, candidates, representatives, or advocates for women’s concerns (O’Brien 2018; Celis and Childs 2018; Shames, Och, and Cooperman 2020). Conservative female representatives claim to represent conservative women better than feminists do (Kretschmer and Meyer 2013; Schreiber 2018). With conservative representatives in parliaments making representative claims, questions about the substantive representation of women must be addressed because they challenge the existing feminist understanding of it (Celis and Childs 2018). It remains to be examined whether the parties on the right lag with respect to this issue (O’Brien 2018). Specifically, socially conservative populist parties remain unexplored in this area.

This is a timely topic against the backdrop of the recent backlash against neoliberalism, which has manifested itself in the electoral victory of conservative parties, in “a renaissance of conservatism” (Bluhm and Varga 2019), and the globalisation of traditional...
values worldwide (ECPG 2019), the rise of authoritarian populism (Markowski 2019; Norris and Inglehart 2019) and anti-gender campaigns (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Korolczuk and Graff 2017). Celis and Childs (2018) have noted that a “conservative moment” has descended on many parts of the world resulting in setbacks for women’s rights. In Central Europe, illiberal transformation is reliant on opposition to the liberal gender equality paradigm (Grzebalska and Pető 2018). In effect, feminist achievements are being widely questioned and challenged.

In this context, this article addresses the following research question: To what extent are women represented substantively in parliament under the right-wing populist party government? To answer this question, in this article, substantive representation is understood as “acting in the interest of the represented” (Pitkin 1967, 209), or, to be more precise, as policy adoption which advances women’s issues (see Dahlerup 2014). This article focuses on two aspects: the “what” and “when” of substantive representation. Consequently, this article raises two sub-questions: What women’s issues are being raised in parliament? When are they adopted as policies? Although women deputies, as descriptive representatives, are assumed to know what women want, it is important to understand the circumstances under which women’s issues become embedded in policies, since policies affect women’s lives. Using representation theory and refined partisan theory, this article demonstrates that female representatives have identified several women’s issues, with state support for childcare and equal pay being the most prominent ones. However, it is the party in government that decides how issues are framed and when they become policies.

In 2015, the right-wing populist Law and Justice (PiS) party won the Polish parliamentary elections and formed a single-party majority government, led by a female prime minister. PiS is socially conservative, promoting traditional and national values, influenced by the Catholic Church. It is hostile to what it calls “gender-ideology” and reluctant to adopt feminist policies (Gwiazda 2020). It withdrew funding for in vitro fertilisation and restricted access to emergency contraception (Korolczuk 2016). Moreover, the party was accused of illiberal practices, and disregard of the constitution, rule of law, and parliamentary procedures (Markowski 2019).

This article is an important contribution to the scholarly literature on women’s political representation for several reasons. First, the unique contribution of this article is its identification of women’s issues within the Central and Eastern European parliamentary context and its contribution to promoting understanding of the circumstances under which they are formulated, or not, into policies, an issue which has not previously been explored despite the discussion of such issues in relation to Western Europe (e.g. Celis et al. 2014). Second, this article is an important contribution to the emerging scholarship on gender and conservatism, the goal of which is to examine whether conservative representatives promote the interests of women and how their efforts differ from those of their left-wing counterparts (Celis and Childs 2014, 2018; O’Brien 2018). Evaluating the gendered claims of elected conservative representatives undoubtedly presents scholars studying women and politics with a new conceptual, empirical and normative research agenda (Celis and Childs 2018). This raises questions about women’s substantive representation as gendered representation. Indeed, this article defines gendered representation. Third, theoretically, this article adopts representation theory and refines the partisan theory to explain the (non-)adoption of policies related to women’s issues.
There is a need to combine the study of women’s substantive representation with the public policy literature. The existing mainstream public policy literature largely ignores women’s issues and policies (e.g. Dodds 2012). While the literature on women and politics explains the adoption of feminist policies (Kittilson 2008; Mazur 2002), it does not engage sufficiently with policies related to women’s issues that include non-feminist content. Consequently, this article addresses this research deficit.

**Literature review**

The scholarly literature on women’s substantive representation commonly refers to Hanna Pitkin’s contribution to representation theory. In her book “The Concept of Representation”, she defined substantive representation as “acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them” (Pitkin 1967, 209), whereas descriptive and symbolic representation refers to “standing for” the represented and presupposes “descriptive likeness” (Pitkin 1967, 92). Although Pitkin’s main interest lies in examining the relation between the represented and the representatives in parliaments, not in the policy outcomes themselves, a strand of research on substantive representation has been concerned with policies (Dahlerup 2014). From this perspective, the policy formation process and policy output are added to Pitkin’s voter-representative perspective (Dahlerup 2014). This article takes up this theme and demonstrates a link between women’s issues and policy adoption.

The first strand of research on substantive representation concerns whether female representatives can be counted on to act in the interests of women and influence feminist policy output (see Kittilson 2011; Wängnerud 2009). Drawing on Phillips’ (1995) theory of the politics of presence, the link between women’s presence and feminist substantive representation has been assumed. Celis and Childs (2018) have argued that traditional accounts of feminist substantive representation frequently point to a universal set of women’s issues and interests. The second strand of research, however, underscores the idea that representing women’s interests and issues is not straightforward given the diverse experiences that women have, sites of representation, and the various types of actors who could represent them. Hence, this perspective points to the complexity of the substantive representation of women (Celis et al. 2014; Childs and Lovenduski 2013; Dahlerup 2014; Mackay 2008; Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2014; Schwindt-Bayer and Taylor-Robinson 2011).

Some recent contributions have highlighted the need to encourage the inclusion of traditional values and conservative interests in the discussion of women’s issues. In fact, it is argued that preferences for women’s traditional roles are strongly related to political conservatism (Cassese and Holman 2017). Yet, O’Brien (2018) has argued that right-wing parties are not a unified entity and that there are important differences regarding women’s representation among conservatives, Christian democrats, and nationalists. Campbell and Erzeel (2018) have demonstrated that many rightist parties in Western Europe combine laissez-faire economic values with liberal feminist ideals. Instead, rightist, conservative, religious, and nationalist parties, take what would be generally recognised as a traditional approach to women’s roles in society (Celis and Childs 2014). In fact, the substantive representation of women among conservatives is frequently rooted in particular conservative accounts of gender relations (Childs and Webb 2012; Erzeel, Celis, and Caluwaerts 2014; Celis and Childs 2014).
Moreover, the “what” of substantive representation is contested. The issue of what women’s issues are addressed by conservatives requires further investigation given the diversity of conservatism. Celis and Childs (2018) have observed that conservative women representatives could privilege different women’s issues and adopt a different conceptualisation of what constitutes women’s interests than their progressive counterparts. By acting on different issues, and articulating different conceptions of what is in the interests of women, conservative women representatives can challenge and change the public discourse about women (Schreiber 2008).

Women’s issues can be identified in several ways: by, for example, examining public opinion polls in terms of gender gap issues; calls from women’s interest groups; and initiatives that promote women’s rights (Reingold and Swers 2011). Another way of identifying women’s issues is to apply an open, inductive methodological approach which avoids the problems of essentialism by avoiding the assumption that women are uniform in their needs (Celis et al. 2008; Celis et al. 2014), also referred to as an endogenous approach that gives a voice to various groups of women, without any a priori definitions (Reingold and Swers 2011).

The “when” of substantive representation is concerned with the conversion of issues into policies. In fact, little attention has been paid to the question of when such representation takes place but it has been acknowledged that “it deserves a place on the research agenda” (Childs and Lovenduski 2013, 503). This question should be considered in terms of when policy adoption takes place. The existing literature mostly concerns feminist policies. Several factors can explain the adoption of such policies. For example, it can occur due to the election of a critical mass of female representatives (Kittilson 2008); the presence of critical actors who initiate policy proposals or encourage others to take steps to promote policies for women (Childs and Krook 2009; Celis et al. 2008); the rise of feminist movements (see Mazur 2002); the participation of women’s agencies (Lovenduski et al. 2005; McBride and Mazur 2010); the predominance of left-wing parties and governments (Krook and Childs 2010; Lovenduski and Norris 1993; Erzeel and Celis 2016); the presence of egalitarian polities (Mazur 2002), or an increase in economic development (Inglehart and Norris 2003). However, the existing literature does not sufficiently reflect on women’s policies which do not result in gender equality but nonetheless impact women’s lives in some way.

The research on the substantive representation of women in Central and Eastern Europe is limited to a few studies. For example, Gallighan (2007) theorised political representation in Eastern Europe. Chiva (2017) examined the role of women’s agency in political representation. Ilonszki and Vajda (2019) examined women’s substantive underrepresentation in Hungary. Gwiazda (2019) discussed the interests, agents and sites of women’s representation in Poland. A Polish study on gender equality conducted by Radiukiewicz (2010) showed that PiS female deputies argued that women were not being discriminated against in Poland. Meanwhile, female deputies from other parties acknowledged existing inequalities in the workplace, at home, and in political representation, in addition to domestic violence. On the other hand, Korolczuk and Graff (2017) discussed how conservative groups fought gender equality education and legislation, sexual and reproductive rights, and the very use of the term “gender” in Poland.

Overall, there is still little information about social conservatism and what it means for women’s representation in Central and Eastern Europe. Moreover, this article identifies a
research gap concerning the adoption of policies related to women’s issues, which include policies that are of interest to women, but not necessarily feminist in their content.

**Conceptual analysis**

Representation means “the making present in some sense of something, which is nevertheless not present literally or in fact” (Pitkin 1967, 8-9) and can occur at a variety of sites (Evans 2015). This article is explicitly focused on exploring women’s substantive representation in parliament because it is important from a policy-making perspective. The concept of women’s substantive representation presupposes that women have a set of issues that politicians can claim to advance (Evans 2015). The “what” of substantive representation deals with women’s issues (Beckwith 2012; Celis et al. 2008; Dahlerup 2014). Celis and Childs (2014, 4) have defined women’s issues as “broad policy category of issues that concern women”.¹ For Lovenduski (2005, 19) women’s issues are “issues that might affect women, either for biological reasons (for example breast cancer screening) or for social reasons (sex equality or childcare policy)”. According to Carroll (1994, 15), women’s issues are those “where policy consequences are likely to have a more immediate and direct impact on significantly larger numbers of women than of men”.

In this article, women’s issues are defined as those which concern women and have an impact on their lives. Women’s issues differ from policies because they are based on informal claims, whereas policies are formalised and presented in the form of a government policy or a legislative act. They are legally-binding written documents. In this article, women’s policies are also considered as the “what” of substantive representation because the key element of women’s substantive representation is legislation that addresses women’s needs, interests, and concerns (see Celis 2009). Representation involves the articulation of group interests, and their translation into policy (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2014).

Feminist representation is a dominant focus of the scholarship on women and politics. It refers to the presence of feminist claims, interests, and issues. In general, feminism refers to the advocacy of gender equality between women and men and the emancipation of women in all spheres (Vincent 2010), but feminism is not uniform and there are various strands of it, including liberal, radical, social ones, among others (Dhamoon 2013). Nevertheless, the focus of feminist representation is on depicting women as independent entities and endorsing the transformation of existing gender roles to achieve gender equality. Within the arena of feminist representation, feminist policies are discussed. According to Mazur (2002, 30, 2017, 80), feminist policies should, inter alia, improve efforts to ensure that women’s rights are respected, reduce the prominence of gender-based hierarchies, encourage recognition of the intersectional complexities of women’s lives, and avoid creating distinctions between the private and public spheres. Mazur (2002) has identified several feminist policy areas: gender equality, political representation, equal employment, reconciliation of work and family responsibilities, family law, reproduction, sexuality and violence, and public service delivery. Conversely, policies which relate to women but do not have the specific objective of enhancing gender equality, can be discussed within the scope of women’s policies (see Gwiazda 2020).²
In this article, gendered representation is understood as the political presence of a traditional understanding of women’s roles in society as mothers and care givers. Women are viewed through the prism of family and motherhood. The idea that women are part of a social entity (family) rather than independent subjects is socially conservative. This type of substantive representation reflects gender-based differences and traditional gender roles, and can include claims, issues, and policies.

According to Celis and Childs (2014), gendered claims address women’s concerns and perspectives but in a different way from those made by feminists. They are “underpinned by a commitment to women’s traditional roles and experiences, not least as mothers, care givers, and victims of violence” and are “framed in terms of improving women’s lives within traditional terms, rather than in feminist ones that seek to transform existing gender roles and norms” (Celis and Childs 2014, 11). In turn, gendered issues and policies are framed in relation to women’s lives within traditional contexts.

Substantive representation is examined within the context of right-wing populism, which amounts to conservatism and populism joined in a single ideology. Since conservatism has various strands (Vincent 2010), further clarification is needed. In this article, the term refers to the combination of social conservatism and populist ideology. Social conservatism is characterised by the high value it places on ideas such as tradition, customs, family, the nation and religion. It denotes the preservation of traditional values and morality, and the perpetuation of traditional gender roles, and favours a social market economy in the economic sphere (Vincent 2010; Gwiazda 2020). Although there are many definitions of populism (e.g. Caiani and Graziano 2019; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017), populism is regarded here as an ideology. According to Mudde (2004, 543), populism is “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two antagonistic groups ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people”. Supporters of populists are like friends who belong to an “ingroup” whereas opponents are like enemies who belong to an “outgroup” (Mudde 2004). Moreover, populism is illiberal because it limits checks and balances (Mudde 2004). Overall, this article understands right-wing populism as socially conservative populist party ideology.

**Theoretical framework**

To answer the main research question and examine the relationship between issues and policies under the right-wing populist party government, representation theory is combined with partisan theory. Thus, the “what” of issues is analysed along with “when” issues become embedded in policies.

Representation theory points to the existence of a degree of complexity in the substantive representation of women. In fact, a key dilemma in representation, specifically the representation of historically under-represented groups, is whose interests are represented, given that competing groups have different preferences regarding policies (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2014). Considering that women are assumed to prioritise a specific set of diverse issues and governments must respond to various constituencies, a question remains which issues are selected and are adopted as policies. To this end, a refined partisan theory is employed here.
The partisan theory proposes that the party composition of a government affects its policy outputs (see e.g. Schmidt 1996; Garrett 1998). It presupposes that political parties have clearly distinguishable policy programmes, since they represent the interests of different constituencies, and that these ideological differences result in different policy choices by them (Schmidt 1996). Simply put, the ideologies of political parties are assumed to influence policy outputs. Incumbent parties choose policies which are broadly compatible with office-seeking, policy-pursuit motives and the preferences of the social constituencies whose votes they seek (Schmidt 1996). Thus, parties are strategic players who seek to maximise their self-interest by attracting enough votes to win elections and influence policy-making.

Although parties matter in all areas of policy-making, this theory has not been applied to policies related to “women’s issues”. In fact, it can be argued that parties also tend to have different policy programmes concerning women, and that, indeed these programmes have different consequences for women. Moreover, political ideology is somewhat complex and its strands must be disentangled to examine how it impacts policy adoption. Furthermore, parties frame issues to suit their objectives and values. Hence, this article is meant to aid in refining the theory by being focused on women’s issues, ideological complexity and issue-framing.

Subsequently, it is argued that there is a direct link between party ideology and women’s substantive representation based on the hypothesis that: Women’s issues are adopted as policies when they are congruent with the ideological stance of the party in government.

Furthermore, when disentangling the nuances of right-wing populist ideology, the impact of social conservatism and populism can be hypothesised as follows: Socially conservative parties are likely to support gendered representation. Populism is likely to influence policy adoption when these policies affect, in some way, the outgroup (populist’s enemies), or are illiberal.

Finally, issue frames are promoted by political parties. Before an issue can be formulated into policy, parties define and construct what is at stake (Slothuus and de Vreese Claes 2010; Blofield and Haas 2013). Feminist scholars emphasise that issues are problematised in different ways, depending on which groups (parties) are able to determine a policy debate, which, in turn, will have impact on the type of policy that is adopted (Blofield and Haas 2013). According to Blofield and Haas (2013, 713), “framing is a strategic choice”. This leads to another hypothesis: Socially conservative parties frame issues in a way that allows them to emphasise their socially conservative values and strategic objectives.

Given the hypotheses above, it can be expected that policies related to “women’s issues”, which do not have a feminist content are adopted by social conservatives, unless strategic objectives indicate otherwise. Populism is likely to influence policies affecting the outgroup and can be illiberal. Socially conservative parties can be expected to frame issues using references to “the family” and the traditional understanding of women’s role in society as mothers and care givers.

According to King, Keohane, and Verba (1994), every theory must have implications regarding the observations that one can expect to make if the theory is correct. The following observable implications for social conservatism are expected: an emphasis on the importance of family, rearing children at home, and keeping women confined to the context of the family (rather than discussing them as independent subjects); as well as
a lack of references to gender equality, labour market equality and reconciliation policy can be expected; in addition, a lack of references to feminism and feminist ideas can be anticipated. The following observable implications for populism are expected: references to “enemies”, the “other”, the “outgroup”, and so on.

Overall, the advantage of this refined theory is the focus placed on the nuances of party ideology and how they influence the adoption of policies related to women’s issues. Moreover, it highlights how party’s values and objectives are reflected in issue framing.

**Methodology**

Case-study research provides an opportunity to conduct an in-depth country-specific analysis (Gerring 2004), especially in terms of the study of women’s interests and issues (Celis et al. 2014). This article is focused on the case of Poland. Women’s substantive representation is analysed in the parliamentary term from 2015 to 2019 when the right-wing populist Law and Justice party was in power. This party held a majority in parliament (the Sejm and the Senate), and was supported by the president. This case enables the exploration of what types of women’s issues became embedded in policies within a socially conservative context, an aspect which has been overlooked in the literature.

Women’s substantive representation in parliament can be examined in terms of process or outcome: the former refers to speaking for women and bringing up women’s issues during parliamentary debates, committee proceedings, and question time; the latter refers to passing laws reflecting women’s concerns (Franceschet and Piscopo 2008). In this article, the focus is placed mostly on the outcome phase (policy adoption) but the act of broaching topics related to women’s issues (“speaking for”) is considered within the context of interviews and parliamentary debates. To explore the “what” of substantive representation, this article employs an endogenous approach which does not assume any a priori understanding of women’s issues and allows various ideological claims to be included (see Reingold and Swers 2011). Instead of assuming a feminist “thin” understanding, this article uses a “thicker” understanding of substantive representation to yield a complete and contextualised understanding of women’s issues and policies (see Mackay 2008).

Subsequently, this article presents the women’s issues proposed by female representatives during interviews with the author of this article. The interviews were conducted in Warsaw in 2017. One female deputy from each parliamentary party was interviewed and asked to identify the most pressing women’s issues. Since there was no prior research on this topic in Poland, this approach seemed appropriate for determining whether women across the political spectrum agreed on the importance of such issues. Instead of acting as the representatives of a political party, the female deputies mentioned the issues that mattered to them. Although a small number of deputies was consulted, it is argued that creating a broad list of women’s issues can be of little political value, it is worthwhile to focus on specific policies (see Evans 2015). Hence, the objective was to map the key issues identified by women deputies rather than present an exhaustive list of issues.

Once the most salient women’s issues were identified, two were selected for further analysis because they appeared to be the most pressing according to the interviewees.
Childcare and the gender pay gap appeared to be especially concerning to women representatives, as was underscored in the interviews. These issues also represent various types of issues: whereas the former is linked to women’s traditional roles as care givers, the latter reflects a typical feminist concern. The focus on two issues, rather than all of them, is a limitation of this research; however, due to the length-related constraints of this medium, it would have been impossible to examine all the women’s issues that exist. Further research should include investigation of the issues that were not explored here in depth.

Besides interviews, data were obtained through a content analysis of parliamentary debates, roll-call votes and quality newspaper articles. With the aim of exploring several nuanced aspects of women’s substantive representation, a content analysis of the parliamentary debate on the Family 500+ programme was conducted. This method was useful for analysing women’s issues because a qualitative content analysis ascribes meaning to texts through their interpretation by a researcher (Schreier 2012). In addition, a roll-call vote on the 2016 bill was analysed to gauge how women from each party voted. Finally, a quality newspaper article (Rzeczpospolita) and an article from a Catholic weekly (interview with former Prime Minister Szydło) were consulted to obtain further insight into the discussion on the gender pay gap.

Finally, this study is a plausibility probe. The plausibility probe allows a researcher to sharpen a theory and refine its premises (Levy 2008). This is an intermediary stage before moving directly from hypotheses construction to the completion of empirical tests (see Levy 2008). Although there are limitations associated with using only two cases to test a theory, the results of this study demonstrate the empirical relevance of the theoretical proposition by identifying at least one relevant case. This analysis constitutes a valuable first step in testing it in the future on a larger dataset.

The case of Poland

**Background**

The right-wing populist Law and Justice party won the 2015 parliamentary election and formed a single-party government led by a female prime minister, Beata Szydło. The second largest party in parliament was the centrist Civic Platform, which was the senior coalition partner in the 2007–2011 and 2011–2015 governments, along with the agrarian Polish Peasant Party. Kukiz’15 and Modern were both new political parties: while the former was a populist anti-system party, the latter was a liberal party. No party from the Left was represented in the Sejm (Markowski 2016). Since 2005, the Polish party system has been based on political competition between the two largest parties: Law and Justice and Civic Platform. When it comes to gender equality, Law and Justice has tended to view women through the lens of the family and contested the existence of sex discrimination in Poland. Modern and Civic Platform have generally supported a liberal vision of women’s empowerment and equality. As socially conservative, the Polish Peasant Party and Kukiz’15 have supported a traditional understanding of women’s role in society.

Table 1 presents the partisan and gender composition of the Lower Chamber of Parliament, the Sejm. In the 2015 election, 125 women were elected to it (out of a total of 460),
making up 27% of all deputies. The women representing conservative parties in the social sphere (PiS, PSL, and Kukiz’15) only outnumbered the female deputies representing centrist and liberal parties (PO and N) by one (63-62). 7

**Women’s issues**

Table 2 lists the issues mentioned by the female deputies. Although they represented various ideologies, several common issues were identified. Childcare and the gender pay gap were mentioned by almost all the interviewees. Besides these two issues, work-family balance, equal opportunities, family policy and domestic violence were discussed.

The women’s issues mentioned reflected both feminist and traditional concerns. The issues that were related to women’s traditional gender roles included childcare, elderly care, subsidies for performing housework, family policy and topics related to women’s health. The feminist issues included political representation, domestic violence, reproductive rights, support for women developing their potential, equal opportunities, women’s employment, gender equality, women’s rights, and work-family balance.

Conservative female deputies from Law and Justice, Kukiz’15, and the Polish Peasant Party mentioned issues that were related to women’s traditional roles, such as childcare and elderly care, payment for housework, family policy (in terms of the strengthening of family ties and the promotion of motherhood), and women’s health issues (specifically, pregnancy and childbirth). However, they also mentioned feminist issues, such as the gender pay gap, work-family balance, domestic violence and equal employment opportunities. The liberal female deputies from Modern and Civic Platform emphasised feminist issues. A female deputy from Modern said that she supported feminist policies, such as those concerned with reproductive rights, including the liberalisation of abortion law and public funding for IVF, in addition to efforts to achieve gender equality, like providing women with equal rights and opportunities, preventing and combating domestic violence, and promoting women’s employment. A female deputy from Civic Platform talked about childcare, reconciliation policy, gender equality and the gender pay gap (Interviews 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6).

**Women’s policies**

Given the multiplicity of women’s issues, a question remains regarding which of them are formulated into policy and, subsequently, adopted. The two most frequently raised concerns by women deputies were related to childcare and gender pay gap
elimination. A puzzling question which is addressed in this section is why one issue was framed and put on the agenda (childcare policy) and the other one (gender pay gap) was ignored. Before policy adoption is explained, an overview of the two policies will be presented.

**Childcare policy**

Law and Justice submitted its bill to parliament in February 2016. The bill on state support for those raising children (the so-called “Family 500+” programme) offered a generous child benefit (PLN 500, €120) for every child after the first per family until the child reached the age of 18, as well as one for the first child for families with a monthly income below €190 per family member (Bill no. 216, 1 February 2016). In the subsequent parliamentary debate, the PiS Minister of Family, Work, and Social Policy argued that the main objectives were to improve the financial situation of families with children, increase the fertility rate and invest in human capital (Sejm 2016). Likewise, numerous PiS deputies emphasised the importance of prioritising the family and raising children but little attention was paid to women, and the PiS Minister for Family, Labour and Social Policy did not refer to women in her related speech at all (Sejm 2016). Already in November 2015, in her inaugural address, Prime Minister Beata Szydło cited the Family 500+ programme as the top priority of her government (Sejm 2015). She extensively emphasised the importance of families and the aid that the government was planning to offer them, and she added that the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy would henceforth be called the “Ministry of Family, Labour, and Social Policy”.

The parliamentary debate on the bill included dissenting opinions from the opposition, who underscored the limitations of the policy. Civic Platform criticised the exclusion of some children from it and supported the idea that all children should be included in the programme. For Modern, it was not a comprehensive policy because it did not include means testing. One of the party’s deputies asked whether the passage of the bill amounted to “vote buying”, protection of the patriarchal family and an effort to undermine female participation in the labour market. Another Modern deputy advanced a new proposal on childcare focused on facilitating women’s return to work after maternity leave, gender equality in the labour market, and the public provision of an increased

| Table 2. Women’s issues in Poland. |
|-----------------------------------|
| **PiS**                          | **PO**       | **Kukiz’15** | **N**         | **PSL**         |
| ---------------------------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Childcare and elderly care       | Childcare and child disability support | Payment for housework | Gender equality as equal rights and equal opportunities | Work-family balance |
| Equal job (promotion) opportunities | Work-family balance | Women’s health | Gender pay gap | Childcare       |
| Work-family balance               | Gender pay gap | Gender pay gap | Reproductive rights | Family policy   |
| Gender pay gap                    | Gender pay gap | Childcare and child disability support | Women’s employment | Social justice  |
| Political representation          | Family policy | Domestic violence | Support for women in developing their potential |                 |
| Domestic violence                 |              |              | Source: Interviews with women deputies in the Sejm, June-July 2017. |
number of nurseries in both large and small towns and communities. The Polish Peasant Party expressed the opinion that supporting families financially was an important initiative but that more should be done to provide an extensive support system in terms of nurseries, kindergartens and a well-functioning labour market. One of the PSL’s deputies pointed out that the PiS proposal put single mothers at a disadvantage. Finally, Kukiz’15 stressed that these were admirable goals but criticised the financial implications of such an extensive social programme (Sejm 2016).

In a vote on the bill, Law and Justice and the Polish Peasant Party expressed support, almost all of Civic Platform’s deputies abstained from voting, Kukiz’15 was split, and Modern opposed it (Roll call no. 29, 11 February 2016). The bill was passed and became a law on 11 February 2016. The biggest redistribution policy since 1989 received much popular support, with 62% of the public assessing it positively (CBOS 2019).

However, female deputies diverged in terms of support for this policy. The roll-call vote demonstrated that all the female deputies from Law and Justice and the Polish Peasant Party supported the bill. In contrast, all the women from Modern voted against it. Most of Civic Platform’s female deputies abstained, but two of them voted for it and two voted against it. Three female deputies from Kukiz’15 supported the bill, two voted against it, and one abstained from voting.

 Likewise, the interviews revealed that, to some women deputies, the law appeared beneficial, whereas others had doubts about it. A female Law and Justice deputy appreciated the income-support solution and said: “The Family 500+ programme supports ‘stay at home’ mothers; women also have a choice and can return to work if they wish to do so. To facilitate this, a network of affordable public kindergartens for children should be available so that women can reconcile work with family life” (Interview 5). A female deputy from Kukiz’15 said: “For me, the issue of choice is important. If a woman decides to stay at home, she cannot be forced to take on a different role” (Interview 3). On the other hand, some of the other interviewees were more critical of the measure. A female deputy from Civic Platform said: “We do not have enough nurseries. There is no support for childcare. I am a feminist. I do not support the government’s policy on childcare” (Interview 6). A female deputy from the Polish Peasant Party said: “For me, it is important that women be able to reconcile work with family life, but the number of kindergartens in small communities should be increased significantly. Women should have access to affordable childcare. We need to develop women’s potential. I am not a feminist, but I fight for social justice” (Interview 2). In fact, the number of childcare facilities has been inadequate (Poland is the fourth lowest ranked in the EU in terms of this metric according to the International Labour Office 2016), and this has impeded the integration of women into the labour market. Participation rates for 0–2-year-olds in formal childcare and pre-school services have been also very low in Poland (International Labour Office 2016).

To sum up, this case demonstrates that, although various women agreed on a policy issue, they were not united when it came to discussing its content and voting on it. In interviews, conservative female deputies from PiS and Kukiz’15 supported giving an option to stay at home, whereas liberal feminists emphasised the need for more affordable public kindergartens. However, even conservative deputies from PiS and PSL agreed that there was a need for more kindergartens.
The gender pay gap

The female representatives who considered the gender pay gap an important issue talked about unfairness and the lack of pay equality but, the issue of gender pay gap was not addressed in parliament from 2015 to 2019. On a few occasions, some references were made to it but no formal legislation was introduced to address the issue. For example, in an interview with a weekly Catholic news magazine, Prime Minister Szydło said that the gender pay gap in Poland was one of the lowest in Europe (Szydło 2017). The implication was that Poland was doing well in this area and hence, there was no need to take any immediate action on it. However, the PiS government was accused of pay discrimination because women earned significantly less than men in the Chancellery of the Prime Minister (Kacprzak 2019). Moreover, in December 2016, the Ombudsman enquired about whether the PiS Minister for Family, Labour, and Social Policy was planning to tackle the gender pay gap. The Ministry responded by saying that it would propose a tool that could be used to measure it. The Ombudsman replied that the development of such a tool would not be sufficient and urged the implementation of other measures (Gajos-Kaniewska 2017). In summary, in the parliamentary term from 2015 to 2019, there was no legislative process concerning the elimination of the gender pay gap.

Explanations

The theory points to the relationship between party ideology and policy adoption. Law and Justice represents social conservatism combined with populism. PiS emphasises the role of the nation, traditions, the family, and the social economy; Catholicism influences national identity, and traditional values. PiS is reluctant to adopt and implement feminist policies. It is traditionalist, and it voices gendered claims by highlighting the role of women as mothers and their conventional role within the family. In the economic sphere, it advocates social transfers and state intervention. In its 2011 manifesto, PiS discussed increasing social benefits for families and support for pregnant women, and it promised pensions for women who sacrificed their careers to raise children (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość 2011). In its 2014 programme, the party reiterated its pledge to increase social provisions for families in the form of a new, universal child benefit (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość 2014). PiS is also populist because it divides society in two antagonistic groups (Gwiazda 2020).

Law and Justice listed childcare policy as one of its election pledges but its content reflected socially conservative norms. By providing generous child benefits, the party has encouraged many women to stay at home, potentially having negative consequences for female employment, pensions, the gender pay gap and reinforcing the stereotypical image of women as mothers first (see Pawlak and Kolasinski 2016; Plomien 2019). Increasing benefit entitlement for mothers will not reduce gender inequality and, thus, does not reflect a feminist intention (Plomien 2019).

The feminist approach argues that women’s interests are best served when the state provides affordable, high-quality nurseries for all children, thereby facilitating women’s labour market participation. On the other hand, the conservative approach represents women’s interests by giving them the opportunity to “choose to stay at home” and care for their children themselves (see Celis et al. 2014). Policies that promote mothers’ employment and offer public childcare services advance gender equality more than
policies promoting traditional families and paying women to stay at home to care for their children (Blofield and Haas 2013).

Law and Justice framed childcare in terms of the family and its well-being, which is a socially conservative approach rather than a liberal feminist one promoting equality between the sexes. The policy objective of PiS was different from that which liberal women deputies wanted. The emphasis was placed on the traditional family and the protection of Poland and its people (making references to the nation is a common approach favoured by social conservatives). Overall, the family frame was deployed by PiS when designing and implementing its model of childcare.

Conversely, the gender pay gap is considered a feminist issue but Law and Justice did not prioritise it because it was not compatible with social conservatism. Consequently, it is unsurprising that the gender pay gap was not part of the parliamentary agenda despite calls from other actors to address the problem. Until 2019, there was not a single reference to the gender pay gap in the PiS manifestos, whereas there were numerous references to the family, childcare and child benefits in them (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość 2011, 2014). Socially conservative Law and Justice adopted a gendered understanding of childcare policy because it was compatible with its ideological stance and policy-pursuit ambitions. Conversely, a feminist issue was not considered.

Several theory implications were observed. Law and Justice placed great emphasis on the family and how the proposed policy would support it. The party did not discuss women independently from the family or as independent subjects. It made no reference to gender equality, feminism, work-life balance or labour market equality. However, one of observable implications, that is, that women should stay at home, was not mentioned in the parliamentary debate. Instead, two conservative women deputies mentioned that women should have a choice when deciding whether to stay at home with their children or return to work.

The partisan theory points to a party’s vote-maximising strategy. The adoption of universal child benefits, which had a direct impact on recipients, can be seen as such strategy to secure office by responding to the preferences of the party’s social constituents. Simply put, parties wish to maximise the support they receive by offering benefits to their voters and distributing resources between them. Since parties choose policies which are compatible with office-seeking, policy-pursuit ambitions and the preferences of the social constituencies, a feminist change might be possible if it benefits a party in vote, office or policy terms. PiS mentioned the gender pay gap for the first time in its election manifesto, which was published in September 2019 (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość 2019), before the scheduled parliamentary elections. Further research should be conducted to investigate how this feminist issue became a party pledge and whether a policy addressing it was adopted and implemented in subsequent years.

Discussion

This article has explored whether party ideology shapes women’s substantive representation and has generated tentative findings which will be discussed below.

First, the findings of this article demonstrate that although conservative women’s descriptive representation was roughly on par with that of liberal (centrist) women deputies, they were represented substantively better than feminist women in the Polish
parliament from 2015 to 2019. This occurred because the socially conservative populist party in government shaped the women’s agenda. When considering representation as outcome, gendered representation prevailed. However, when considering representation as process, women deputies spoke for women and represented various women’s issues, including feminist ones. The parliamentary process permitted the representation of diverse voices. Feminist representation was present but it was limited to “speaking for” rather than “acting for” women.

Second, the “what” of women’s substantive representation translated into not only the representation of varied issues but also, in some respects, the convergence of them. The Polish case demonstrates that the liberal female deputies tended to support feminist issues, but conservative deputies also discussed feminist issues, in addition to gendered ones. When speaking for women, the conservative women deputies tended to be more feminist (even if some of them did not want to use the term) than their respective parties, but when acting on behalf of women, they tended to vote along party lines.

Moreover, women representatives from various political parties have identified similar issues, such as childcare, the gender pay gap, work-family balance, equal opportunities, family policy, and domestic violence. In fact, the issues raised by the Polish women deputies were much like those raised by their counterparts in Western Europe. Celis et al. (2014) found that an interest in mitigating the gender pay gap was shared by all actors in Belgium, Finland, and the United Kingdom. Moreover, violence against women, access to the labour market, and political representation were identified as important women’s issues in all three countries; these issues were also discussed by the Polish female deputies. Childcare was a prominent issue in Finland and the United Kingdom.

Third, a women’s issue is adopted as policy when it is congruent with the ideological stance of the party in government which is bound to attempt to maximise its vote, office and policy objectives. This explains why Law and Justice adopted childcare policy, using the family frame, and failed to broach the gender pay gap. Law and Justice increased its spending on childcare policy but promoted conservative interests by offering child benefits that encouraged the strengthening of the traditional division of gender roles, rather than promoting a feminist approach to childcare. In the socially conservative context, it is difficult to put feminist issues on the agenda unless the party supports feminist claims. A non-parliamentary agent (the Ombudsman) attempted to put the issue of the gender pay gap on the agenda but it was not taken up by the government because it was not part of its socially conservative party programme until 2019. In sum, the “when” of substantive representation depends on the parties in government. As one of the interviewees aptly observed: “there is no denying that the political party determines the representation of women’s issues in Poland” (Interview 3). In this article, a more nuanced approach to partisan theory was proposed to include women’s policies, ideological complexities and issue framing.

However, although the impact of social conservatism was demonstrated in this article, little populism (using Mudde’s definition) was observed, although the opposition accused PiS of engaging in “populist actions” by spending public money on child benefits to attract votes. The definition of populism used here focused on the ideological aspect and the presence of two antagonistic groups, rather than specific populist actions. The theoretical implications regarding populism were not observed. In debates on childcare and sketchy coverage of the gender pay gap, there were no references to an outgroup
or illiberal ideas. For Law and Justice, the outgroup consisted of refugees in 2015, and an LGBTQ+ community in 2019 (see Gwiazda 2020). Thus, the impact of populist ideology would be expected to surface in illiberal policy responses such as anti-immigrant and anti-gender measures. Further research should explore this issue.

Fourth, this article demonstrates that gendered substantive representation results from the socially conservative party holding power. Gendered representation is defined here as the political presence of a traditional understanding of women’s roles in society as mothers and care givers in which women are viewed through the prism of family and motherhood rather than being considered independent subjects. This type of representation reflects gender differences and traditional gender roles. In general, increasing benefit entitlement for mothers will not reduce gender inequality and, thus, does not have a feminist intention. Additional government spending did not include a transformative feminist agenda or gender equal outcomes (Plomien 2019). Hence, the childcare policy adopted in Poland can be considered gendered.

Finally, since this article has explored substantive representation articulated by women and parties, it also dealt with the “who” question. The strand of the literature on women’s substantive representation assumed that women deputies represented women substantively; an argument which was derived from descriptive representation arguments (see Childs and Krook 2008). The sample of women deputies interviewed for this research spoke on behalf of other women. When it came to acting for women (voting for policy), their agency was contingent on the ideology of the party in government. Moreover, since they represented diverse women’s interests and issues, they did not vote as a unified bloc on childcare policy, which contravened some of the findings in the literature that indicated that women’s political presence might trump the ideology of the party in power (e.g. Kittilson 2008; Swers 1998). Furthermore, this article also demonstrates that while political parties are agents of women’s substantive representation, the type of representation depends on the type of party ideology that prevails. Right-wing parties which are socially conservative can be expected to be agents of gendered representation. However, ideologies are not static; they evolve over time due to strategic calculations or other reasons. Hence, further research should explore this aspect of the discussion.

**Conclusion**

This article has examined the various aspects of women’s substantive representation in the context of right-wing populism in Poland. This subject is important because of the significance of political representation for contemporary democracies and the inadequate engagement of mainstream public policy literature with women’s issues and policies and limited involvement of the scholarly literature with conservatism and substantive representation in Central and Eastern Europe. Using representation theory and refined partisan theory, this article has shed light on some of the nuanced aspects of political ideology and women’s substantive representation. It has demonstrated that a few common women’s issues can be identified, such as childcare and the gender pay gap but the right-wing populist Law and Justice party had the final say in which issues became embedded in policies and how they were framed during the period under examination. Gendered representation prevailed.
The relationship between political ideology and women’s substantive representation was tentatively assessed through a plausibility probe, but further empirical tests are needed. Moreover, future research could engage with an analysis of remaining women’s issues; how a feminist issue has become a party issue and whether a policy reflecting it was adopted and implemented in subsequent years; how populism might influence anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ+ policy responses; or how women can put issues on the political agenda if the parties in government are not supportive. In conclusion, more research on the substantive representation of women in Central and Eastern Europe is needed.

List of Interview

Interview 1. Interview with a female deputy from Modern, Warsaw, June 14, 2017.
Interview 2. Interview with a female deputy from the Polish Peasant Party, Warsaw, June 20, 2017.
Interview 3. Interview with a female deputy from Kukiz’15, Warsaw, June 21, 2017.
Interview 4. Interview with a journalist dealing with women’s issues, Warsaw, June 26, 2017.
Interview 5. Interview with a female deputy from Law and Justice, Warsaw, July 21, 2017.
Interview 6. Interview with a female deputy from Civic Platform, Warsaw, July 21, 2017.

Notes

1. Celis and Childs (2014, 4) define women’s interests as “the content given to particular issues.”
2. Women might have interests (or perspectives to use Lovenduski’s 2005 term) related to other policies, but they may be indirectly linked to women’s experiences.
3. During the 2015–19 period, the parties of the Left were not represented in parliament so there was no discussion about the issues proposed by leftist female deputies.
4. In the 2015 election, almost 12% of the votes were cast for the parties of the left, which were not represented in parliament. The electoral coalition of the United Left, which included the Democratic Left Alliance, Your Movement, and other small parties, received 7.5% of the vote but fell short of the 8% threshold for coalition. The new leftist party, Razem (Together), which did not join this coalition, received 3.6% of the vote but failed to clear the 5% threshold for parties (Markowski 2016).
5. The party system is based on an axis of “liberalism vs. solidarism,” which pitted the beneficiaries of the post-1989 economic and political transformation (supporters of Civic Platform) against those who felt that they had experienced a decline in their economic well-being or social esteem (supporters of Law and Justice). Law and Justice challenged not only the distributive consequences of the transformation, but also the post-1989 liberal-democratic political order itself, directing its message at cultural traditionalists (Twarogzecki 2019).
6. Civic Platform was initially classified as a liberal conservative party. Over time, it expanded the centre-left faction within the party, and is now often discussed in centrist terms.
7. This is a rough approximation of the types of representation based on party membership, yet, individual women deputies tend to diverge from the party’s stance occasionally.
8. Bill no. 216, 1 February 2016, Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej.
9. In 2019, child benefits were extended to the first child regardless of family income.
10. Journal of Laws, 2016, item. 195, 11 February 2016.
11. Research Ethics Approval No. MR/16/17-447.
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