Women’s Representation
In Local Politics in the Nordic Countries
– Does Geography Matter?

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*** work in progress – please do not quote ***
Introduction

As of today, a total of 21.4 percent of all seats in national parliaments worldwide are held by women (IPU, 2014), or framed otherwise, no less than 78.6 of all MPs around the globe are men. Incremental gains and a few countries’ fast tracking aside, the numerical underrepresentation of women in national legislatures seems somewhat permanent. The more recent enthusiasm regarding quota system’s kick-off potential (Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2005; Krook, 2009) has been paralleled by – in regard to women’s descriptive representation – more pessimistic tunes along the lines of for instance “saturation without parity” (Kjaer, 1999), “gender backlash” (Sanbonmatsu, 2008), “stabilization phase” (Christmas-Best & Kjaer, 2007), “glass ceiling” (Palmer & Simon, 2001), and “stalled” (Trimble et al., 2013).

Numerous studies has been conducted trying to grasp why so few women make it into political assemblies (e.g. Randall, 1982; Norris, 1985; Darcy et al., 1994; Paxton, 1997; Matland, 1998; Reynolds, 1999; Siaroff, 2000; Diaz, 2005; Christmas-Best & Kjaer, 2007, Hughes & Paxton, 2008; Paxton et al., 2010, Krook, 2010; Thames & Williams, 2013) and consensus has more or less formed around a number of explanations which have found solid empirical support. Except for the almost tautological claim that effective women quotas lead to more women in legislatures, proportional electoral systems (as opposed to majoritarian systems) tend to be the pet explanation identified by most commentators (Rule, 1981, 1987; Norris, 1985, 1987). Of course this is an important finding since it can be used by electoral engineers in the attempt to affect the actual gender composition of legislatures. However, the strong support to this finding might also have refrained researchers from pursuing other hypotheses at further length. There are two important exceptions to this, namely a number of studies which tries to expand the number of countries included in the analyses (typically by moving beyond Western democracies) (Paxton et al., 2010; Thames & Williams, 2013) and studies which “go state and local” (Sanbonmatsu 2006; Carroll & Sanbonmatsu 2013; Kjaer 2010).

A fairly quick perusal of the literature finds that there have been far more studies looking across large number of countries than those that have considered the sub-national level; perhaps because of the difficulty of collecting all data at the local level or the ease with which national level data are collected. At this point, the sub-national strategy seems to be the most promising in regard to generating new and more nuanced insights into women’s descriptive
representation. The idea of going sub-national is by no means new – on the contrary it was emphasized already by one of the modern founding fathers of the comparative method to get around the “many variables, small N” problem of comparative politics (Lijphart, 1975: 159). And it has been repeated that “… comparative analysis across sub-national units within a single nation state is also a fruitful form of political analysis. Indeed, if we are interested in employing comparative analysis for the purposes of testing political theory then in many ways this form of analysis has even greater potential than has the cross-national one” (Peters, 1998: 22). More recently the call has been restated (Paxton et al., 2007: 275; Marschall et al., 2011) and this strategy will be followed in this paper.

We agree with Trounstine that 1) local politics is interesting per se because local governments take important political decisions, 2) there are methodological advantages to studying local politics, and 3) it is possible to include variables and answer questions not possible at the national level (Trounstine, 2009: 612). In our case by going local we can 1) learn something about women’s descriptive representation at the so far quite overlooked local level, 2) we can test hypotheses on larger datasets, and 3) we can include new variables such as urbanization and different spatial dimensions. The flipside of this going local approach is that local politics might deviate from national politics making the findings less generalizable but we believe testing nationally accepted theories for robustness at the local level is an important step in theory testing. Furthermore, the detailed level of data that can be available at the local level may help us identify mechanisms that are quite generic.

Despite the attractiveness of local politics as a hunting ground for scholars of women and politics, the number of studies conducted exploiting the local politics option have so far not been impressive. The explanation for this scarcity seems not in this case to be the second rate perception of local politics which political scientists sometimes seem to hold. Instead the explanation probably rests on the lack of access to systematic data on local election results (Marschall et al., 2011: 97). While local legislatures in theory are obvious sites for empirical research, in practice they are often disqualified by the real world scarcity of data.

However, some studies on women in local politics has been produced (e.g., Bristow, 1980; Antolini, 1984; Bullock & MacManus, 1991; Kjaer, 1999, 2010; Yule, 2000; Rao, 2005; Borisyuk, 2007, Paxton et al., 2010; Ransford & Thomson, 2011). One of the most thorough studies has been done by Adrienne R. Smith, Beth Reingold and Michael Leo Owens of
women’s descriptive representation in large US cities (2012). In this study they include a large number of explanatory variables; traditional ones such as the presence of term limits, if the elections are held at-large, the number of seats at the council etc., along with a number of new (and from a theoretical point of view very interesting) variables such as the presence of women’s organizations and if the city have previously had a female mayor (the classic role model argument) (Smith et al., 2012: 323).

Smith, Reingold and Owen find that only three of their included variables come out having a statistically significant effect on the level of women’s representation, namely ideology, women’s socio-demographic resources and population size. The more liberal electorate, the better educated and earning the women in the electorate, and the larger the city in terms of inhabitants, the more women serves at the council. We use these findings as a starting point, since we find not least the demonstrated importance of the size variable interesting. We also work to extend the work Smith et al. have done by trying to develop more fully the size variable in this article.

As for population size, Smith et al. note that size is included, not as a variable of theoretical interest of itself, but rather as a proxy for another important theoretical variable, namely the desirability of office. Since previous research has now found that municipality size and number of women at the council correlates positively, we will use that as a starting point for our theorizing on size in this article.

As for the empirical effects of the size variable Smith et al.’s analysis was limited due to the difficulty of data access. They include only cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants and therefore they basically only compare big cities to very big cities, missing the opportunity to evaluate the full spectrum of the municipality size variable. This also means that they do not get the opportunity to include a dimension of the size variable which we believe may have important implications for representation beyond the sheer number of inhabitants, namely that of urbanization: in their sample of big cities they have by definition only urban areas and therefore no variation on the urban/rural dimension.

We do by no means criticize Smith et al. Instead we acknowledge their important contribution to the literature on women in local politics and proceed by scrutinizing further the positive relationship they find between population size and percentage of women elected
to local councils. In order to do this we take the empirical analysis to another context, namely that of the Nordic countries, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark. These countries are excellent for studies of the women in local councils since they 1) all have available election statistics covering the local elections in a comparable way, 2) all have almost no intra-country variations in terms of institutional set-up – the electoral system, form of government, election rules, electoral cycle etc. is more or less identical for all municipal units within each of the countries, and 3) all have quite some variation on the main independent variable size of municipality (and different dimensions hereof). Furthermore, by testing the impact of these variables across four different countries we consciously attempt to insure that the results we find are robust across sites. Often studies of local governments or single countries are subject to the criticism that the results found may uniquely hold in the one place they have been tested. Very rarely do studies attempt to test theories concerning local government across several countries simultaneously. We do so in this work.

**Geographical explanations of women’s representation**

So apart from the recent empirical demonstration of a positive correlation between the numbers of people living in a municipality and the level of female representation at the local council in the same municipality, why should we expect such a relationship? At least initially one would expect the number of inhabitants to NOT have any direct effect on women’s descriptive representation on local councils. Although the size and democracy literature starting with Dahl and Tufte’s seminal book (Dahl & Tufte, 1973) most often use number of inhabitants in a political entity as the key explanatory variable to democratic phenomena such as political participation, political trust, turnout etc., it is not always size in itself that is expected to have an effect. For many of the variables considered in political science, including those measured by Dahl and Tufte, the community size is expected to impact some other part of community life which is the real factor driving the results. For example social capital, actually knowing the political candidates, and being able to find individuals with similar beliefs and tastes. For example, when Taagepera hypothesizes (and actually also empirically demonstrates) that the number of inhabitants in a political entity effect the number of seats in the legislature making decisions for this democratic unit it is because he theorizes about how the number of lines of communication between representatives and citizens can be optimized (Taagepera, 1972). This is in many way exemplary since Taagepera
not only hypothesizes how the relationship will be between population size and a democratic measure (number of seats at the legislature), but also specifies very exactly what it is about population size which triggers the effect.

Taagepera and others might have a relatively easy job since they can argue that the sheer number of inhabitants have a direct effect on the democratic dimension in question. We cannot do that, since there is nothing about the sheer number of people living in a municipality which should let us to expect more women councilors. And the empirical findings have also been quite mixed – while in some studies a correlation between size and women’s descriptive representation have been found (Sinkkonen, 1983), it is worth noticing that other studies find no correlation (Antolini, 1984: 39). However, municipal size can be claimed to have indirect effects, since several of the usual suspects in regard to explaining women’s presence in political assemblies tend to have a potential size dimension to them.

The most obvious is urbanization. When in their seminal book on women in politics Darcy et al. find there is no correlation between size and women’s representation (Darcy et al., 1994: 45), they emphasize that the focus should not be on population size per se but on urbanization, since it is in more urban and modernized municipalities that a relatively friendly attitude towards female candidates is found (Darcy et al., 1994: 47). It does not in itself help women that jurisdiction borders are drawn so that many people live in the same municipality – if they at the same time are scattered around a huge area, the potential effect of the condensed urban setting (with its supposedly more modern gender attitudes) will of course be absent. The theorizing behind the presumed correlation between population size and women’s representation assumes that municipalities in more urban areas are more likely to have both the accompanying modernization in values which tends to drive the representation of women upwards and a sufficient numbers of women with the resources to provide support for women considering a run for office.

Even though more populous municipalities are often in the real world found in more urban areas, the correlation is in theoretically terms flawed. As areas develop and what were once small cities sprawl into neighboring localities a large metropolitan area may develop with the overall urban area split up into several municipalities some with low numbers of inhabitants and others with high numbers of residents. In addition, large rural areas can form a single municipality totaling quite a number of inhabitants. If the theorizing behind size and
women’s descriptive representation is actually build on a “the more urban the more women”-argument then it should be specified and empirical analyses should therefore include level of urbanization instead of number of inhabitants. Therefore, our first hypothesis goes:

**H1:** The more urbanized the municipality the higher level of women’s descriptive representation at the local council

A second way that population size can actually affect the number of women elected to local councils is through the number of seats on the council. As mentioned, Taagepera argues the number of seats in a legislature should be positive correlated with the number of inhabitants in the relevant political entity and he also empirically demonstrates that this is often the case. And the more seats the more women (Welch & Studlar, 1990), since more seats “open … up new opportunities for women and minorities to serve in the body” (Frederick, 2010: 116). Or to take the argument from the classical size and democracy literature (and with the opposite sign): The fewer the seats, the “greater the differences in social characteristics – occupation, education, income, and the like – between representative and constituents” (Dahl and Tufte 1973, p. 84). The argument has been around for a long time and in its district formulation, it is now one of the most well established findings that “the fewer members of parliament per district, the fewer women are elected” (Rule, 1987: 484). The logic behind the argument is, that “If district magnitude is one, a female candidate shuts out all male candidates. In districts of a larger magnitude, male candidates who represent powerful intraparty constituencies do not need to be deposed for a female candidate to receive a spot on the party's list” (Matland & Brown, 1992: 471). Therefore, “balancing the ticket is possible when district magnitude is large; it is more difficult when district magnitude is small” (Matland & Brown, 1992: 471). The number of studies demonstrating this correlation is impressive (e.g. Farrell, 2001: 166; Htun and Jones, 2002; Matland, 1998, 2005; Norris, 1996, 2004). Therefore our second hypothesis will be:

**H2:** The higher district magnitude the higher level of women’s descriptive representation at the local council

A third possible explanation for the differences in women’s descriptive representation can be variations in ideological and partisan compositions of the councils. In areas with more conservative parties winning the lion’s share of the seats, there will be fewer women on the
council if these parties at the same time have a relative preference for running male candidates, whereas women’s access to the councils could be more easy where more left leaning parties dominate (Christmas-Best & Kjaer, 2007). The assumption is that left leaning parties are more supportive of traditionally underrepresented groups such as women and within the Nordic context are more likely to have adopted gender quotas to insure equal representation on the parties list of candidates. The relationship between the electoral strength of left wing parties and women’s representation has been demonstrated again and again (e.g., Rule, 1987, Kenworthy & Malami, 1999, Reynolds, 1999, Siaroff, 2000, Paxton et al., 2007, Smith et al., 2012). Therefore, our third hypothesis will be:

\[H_3: \text{The more seats won by parties of the left the higher women’s descriptive representation at the local council level.}\]

Our fourth hypothesis deals with a variable which has received empirical support in other studies (including by Smith et al.), namely what has been labelled “the labor force hypothesis” stating that “where women have a high presence in the labor force … they will be more present in the political elite” (Christmas-Best & Kjaer, 2007: 84). The variable has been included in several studies (e.g. Rule, 1987; Paxton, 1997; Oakes & Almquist, 1993) and the argument goes, that if most of the skills of the candidates favored in the political recruitment process are best learned by having a pay check job then the women need to be successfully included in the labor market before they can be successful in the candidate market. Therefore, our fourth hypothesis is:

\[H_4: \text{The higher women’s labor force participation rates the higher the level of women’s descriptive representation at the local council level.}\]

Finally, since we use size and urbanization in our discussion and since we speculate about modernization we will also introduce a variable not analyzed in regard to women’s representation before, namely that of center/peripheral location. Almost half a decade ago Rokkan introduced his famous distinction between the center and the periphery and not least the idea that innovation and change comes from the center and then only afterwards (and sometimes slowly) spread to the periphery. His concepts are most famously applied to the study of political parties where the term politicization denoting the “breakdown of the traditional systems of local rule through the entry of nationally organized parties into
municipal elections” (Rokkan 1966: 244). In more general terms we could also speculate, building upon the ideas of modernization from the center that the inclusion of hitherto under-represented groups, such as women, would start at the center and only afterwards be implemented in the periphery. And since the inclusion of women at the local councils is not yet brought to an end it might be that the periphery still lags behind. Therefore, our fifth hypothesis goes:

\[ H5: \text{The closer the municipality is located to the political center of the country the higher level of women’s descriptive representation at the local council} \]

The five hypotheses will now be tested on data from the Scandinavian countries, which will be introduced in the next section.

**Data**

In the Scandinavian countries of Norway, Denmark, Finland and Sweden local elections are held in much the same way. This is not to say that the electoral system is identical in the four countries – for instance the specifics about preferential voting varies quite a lot between the countries. But, within each country local elections are held in all municipalities on the same day, local elections are at-large with each municipality being one district, using a PR system to determine seat allocation. They have a fixed four year electoral term, the same electoral system applies in all of the country’s municipalities, all elections are partisan. The municipalities are unitary governments; the same form of government applies within each country etc.

As already mentioned, in each of the countries the respective national statistical bureaus after each election collects all the election reports from each of the municipalities and makes them publicly available. This means that it is possible to get access to reliable data on local elections at a level not many countries can match. We have chosen to use the latest election in each of the countries which means that we include data from the local elections in Denmark held November 17, 2009, local elections held in Sweden on October 15, 2010, the Norwegian local elections of September 11-12, 2011, and the local elections in Finland October 28, 2012. Table 1 gives a brief overview over the data.
Table 1. Data included in the study of the Scandinavian countries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of municipalities</th>
<th>No. of candidates</th>
<th>No. of women candidates</th>
<th>% women candidates</th>
<th>No. of elected councilors</th>
<th>No. of women councilors</th>
<th>% women councilors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>9.049</td>
<td>2.810</td>
<td>31,1</td>
<td>2.468</td>
<td>785</td>
<td>31,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>52.069</td>
<td>21.662</td>
<td>41,6</td>
<td>12.969</td>
<td>5.582</td>
<td>43,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>429</td>
<td>59.505</td>
<td>24.844</td>
<td>41,8</td>
<td>10.785</td>
<td>4.115</td>
<td>38,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>304</td>
<td>37.125</td>
<td>14.422</td>
<td>38,8</td>
<td>9.674</td>
<td>3.503</td>
<td>36,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.121</td>
<td>157.748</td>
<td>63.748</td>
<td>40,4</td>
<td>35.896</td>
<td>13.985</td>
<td>39,0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: The 16 municipalities in the Aaland archipelago which is an autonomous region of Finland are not included.

From a comparative perspective the data show women fare relatively well in the Scandinavian countries when it comes to representation of women in local governments with approximately four out of ten councilors being a woman. These numbers place them at the very top in comparison with other European countries (Kjaer, 2010). It can also be seen that some variation exists with Sweden in front and Denmark lagging somewhat behind. Table 1 also demonstrates that moving from candidates to actually elected representatives produces only a modest impact on the representation of women – in two countries (Denmark and Sweden) the voters increase the percentage of women compared to the lists of candidates when the councils are elected, whereas in the other two countries (Norway and Finland) representation is slightly lower among those finally elected. Before moving on to testing the proposed hypotheses we wish to consider the distribution of the dependent variable across the countries. Table 2 demonstrates substantial variation exists in the percentage of women on the councils within each of the countries. In Sweden the variation is a little smaller than in the other three countries, mostly because the low tail is truncated; no municipality in Sweden has less than 28.6% women, while all of the other countries have a considerable number of cases below this level.
Table 2. Percentage of women among the councilors at the local councils in the Scandinavian countries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Lowest</th>
<th>Highest</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>57.9</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>57.5</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>61.3</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>429</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>58.8</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>304</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: See Table 1.

Results

We now turn towards testing the five specific hypotheses proposed. As part of dealing with Hypothesis 1 regarding degree of urbanization we start by evaluating if, as argued above, it is wise to include urbanization instead of merely population in terms of number of inhabitants when the empirical data are evaluated. Therefore, we set out in Table 3 by taking a look at the relationship between size and women’s representation by running a very simple model explaining the percentage of women at the council exclusively by population size. It should be noticed that we split our analyses by country throughout the paper. This makes sense for a number of reasons. First, this allows us to perform four independent trials of our hypotheses. Second, it is possible that the variables do not function the same way across countries and subsuming them into one sample could hide differences that are theoretically important. As there are four times as many municipalities in Norway as Denmark, an effect may appear in the joint dataset as significant based entirely on having an impact in Norway and it may not work in Denmark. We could not see this if we included all the cases in one datafile.

Table 3. Percentage of women at the council in the Scandinavian countries explained by municipal size (population in thousands of inhabitants). OLS regression - Beta coefficients (standard errors in parentheses).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
<th>Norway</th>
<th>Finland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Size (population/1000)</td>
<td>.03 (.02)**</td>
<td>.01 (.01)**</td>
<td>.02 (.01)**</td>
<td>.05 (.01)*****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>30.03 (1.23)*****</td>
<td>42.60 (.33)*****</td>
<td>37.51 (.43)*****</td>
<td>34.46 (.50)*****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R^2</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National statistical bureaus.
Table 3 demonstrates a positive relationship between size of municipality and women’s descriptive representation at the councils (the relationship is statistically significant in all countries but Norway where it is just insignificant at a .05-level). It should be noticed that we use population size and not the logged value which is more or less the standard but it turns out that the un-logged variable tend to work slightly better in the models.

Table 3 can be compared to the models in Table 4, where instead of municipal population we use level of urbanization as the independent variable. As Table 4 demonstrates the relationship between level of urbanization and women’s descriptive representation is positive and statistically significant in all of the four countries. The explanatory power of the models is in general slightly higher which supports our claim that urbanization is a more accurate measure and the more relevant variable to include in the further analyses. However, it should also be noticed that even though urbanization can be found to have an impact on women’s numerical representation in all of the four countries the effect is not very substantial and we cannot explain much of the observed variation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
<th>Norway</th>
<th>Finland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urbanization (pop/km²)</td>
<td>2.3 1 (.64)***</td>
<td>1.26 (.62)***</td>
<td>7.64 (2.83)***</td>
<td>9.53 (.48)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>30.59 (.94)***</td>
<td>42.76 (.31)***</td>
<td>37.37 (.43)***</td>
<td>34.72 (.48)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Urbanization is calculated as population in thousands of inhabitant pr. square kilometer. Source: National statistical bureaus.

The second hypothesis claims that district magnitude – or in this case where each municipality is one multi-member district – the number of seats at the council effects women’s descriptive representation positively. Even though this is a hypothesis very persistently promoted in the literature, the empirical support for the claim in this study is not at all impressive. As can be seen from Table 5, only in Finland, district magnitude tends to effects positively the percentage of women at the council in a substantial way, whereas in Norway there is only a minor effect and none of significance in Denmark or Sweden. This may be partially because there is a strong correlation between the number of seats per council and the municipalities’ size. It has been argued that instead of district magnitude instead party magnitude is the relevant variable (Matland, 1993); that the number of members in a party’s
delegation from an electoral district is to be even more directly associated with the success of female candidates. Across the 1121 municipalities included in the study a total of 7227 parties/lists have won seats, but the correlation between the number of seats conquered by the party and the percentage of the women in each party’s delegation is not at all substantial (Pearson r = .08). If the average size of the party’s delegations to the councils is included instead of district magnitude in Table 5 the results will not vary substantial. It should also be noticed that a recent study of local elections in Denmark simulating different number of seats and the consequences on women’s representation find that the positive effect of district magnitude disappears when a district magnitude of 11 is reached (Kjaer & Elklit, 2014), and since most Danish councils have between 19 and 31 members it is no surprise that district magnitude within the Nordic context does not have a significant effect here.

Table 5. Percentage of women at the council in the Scandinavian countries explained by district magnitude. OLS regression. Beta coefficients (standard errors in parentheses).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
<th>Norway</th>
<th>Finland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District magnitude</td>
<td>-.06 (.15)</td>
<td>.03 (.02)</td>
<td>.10 (.04)</td>
<td>.18 (.04)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>33.36 (3.98)***</td>
<td>41.54 (1.12)***</td>
<td>35.18 (1.14)***</td>
<td>29.47 (1.23)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: District magnitude is the number of seats on the council.
Source: National statistical bureaus.

Also the variable included in our third hypothesis – the left-party hypothesis – is indeed a classic within the research on women and politics. Since we have data on the party level in each of the four countries it allows us to test whether the percentage of seats in the legislature held by left-wing parties has the presumed positive effect on women’s descriptive representation. Assigning political parties to party families is far from an easy (or uncontroversial) task. In the literature on women’s representation sometimes socialist parties are included as the more women friendly group of parties whereas other times it is the slightly broader category of left-wing parties. We have distinguished between four groups of parties, namely 1) socialist parties, 2) other center-left wing parties such as social liberals but also green parties, 3) center-right wing parties including conservatives, libertarians, agrarian liberals etc., and 4) local lists which have no official partisan strings attached and very often are explicitly non-partisan. Since some of the center-left wing parties actually, at least in the Scandinavian case, tend to have quite a number of women on their lists we have chosen to
use a broad left-wing category in our analyses (collapsing the socialist and the center-left wing categories into one). The results are shown in Table 6 and they turn out to be somewhat inconclusive. The hypothesis is clearly confirmed in the Swedish and the Norwegian cases; in these countries the partisan composition of the councils effects the gender composition of the same council. However in Finland and not least in Denmark this effect cannot be found in any significant way. We will return to a more detailed discussion of the Danish case and the diversion from the general trend found here.

Table 6. Percentage of women at the council in the Scandinavian countries explained by seats held by left wing parties. OLS regression. Beta coefficients (standard errors in parentheses).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
<th>Norway</th>
<th>Finland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seats of the left</td>
<td>-.00 (.08)***</td>
<td>.10 (.02)***</td>
<td>.11 (.02)***</td>
<td>.07 (.04)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>32.09 (3.76)***</td>
<td>37.16 (1.28)***</td>
<td>32.40 (1.17)***</td>
<td>32.77 (1.38)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Seats of the left is the percentage of the seats won by parties who could be assigned to be either socialist or center-left wing parties. Source: National statistical bureaus.

As for the fourth hypotheses, claiming that the degree to which women are part of the paid labor force will influence the percentage of women being elected to the local councils, the empirical analysis demonstrates that not much support is found for this claim. As Table 7 shows in all but the Danish case, no evidence can be found indicating that women’s partaking in bringing home wages from paid work influences women’s partaking in the local political processes at City Hall.

Table 7. Percentage of women at the council in the Scandinavian countries explained by the percentage of women in the labor force. OLS regression. Beta coefficients (standard errors in parentheses).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
<th>Norway</th>
<th>Finland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women in labor force</td>
<td>.63 (.25)***</td>
<td>-.09 (.07)***</td>
<td>.08 (.11)***</td>
<td>.14 (.16)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-12.06(17.34)***</td>
<td>49.53 (5.64)***</td>
<td>31.85 (8.63)***</td>
<td>22.41 (14.84)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Women in labor force is the percentage of women who is in a paid job. Source: National statistical bureaus.
The opposite story can be told with the last variable included – a variable which is a rookie in the group of explanations to women’s descriptive representation at the local level – namely the center-peripheral status of the municipality. The Rokkan-inspired claim is that the farther away from the political/economic/cultural center of the country the less women will be present at the local council. Therefore, we have measured the geographical distance (the log of the number of kilometers from the national parliament in the capital to the City Hall of the given municipality) and used this measure in the models in Table 8. And in this case we find a very consistent effect across the countries. For all four countries a statistically significant negative effect of peripheral status can be demonstrated on the level of women’s descriptive representation at the council. The farther away from the capital, the less women councilors are present at the councils.

Table 8. Percentage of women at the council in the Scandinavian countries explained by the center/peripheral status of the municipality. OLS regression. Beta coefficients (standard errors in parentheses).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
<th>Norway</th>
<th>Finland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Periphery</td>
<td>-6.19***</td>
<td>-1.79***</td>
<td>-1.91***</td>
<td>-5.71***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>43.86***</td>
<td>47.31***</td>
<td>42.63***</td>
<td>49.13***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Periphery is measured as the logged distance in kilometer from City Hall in the municipality to the National Parliament in the capital of the relevant country. Source: The distance is obtained by entering each of the addresses of Parliaments and City Halls in commercial traffic search engines operated in each of the countries.

The results of the bivariate analyses points to the number of seats won by left wing parties being important in Sweden and Norway and the two geographical variables urbanization and peripheral status being important to women’s descriptive representation in all four of the countries. However, these variables are interrelated and therefore we have included all of the variables in a set of multivariate analyses reported in Table 9.
Table 9. Percentage of women at the council in the Scandinavian countries explained by urbanization, district magnitude, seats of the left, women in the labor force and peripheral status. OLS regression. Beta coefficients (standard errors in parentheses).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
<th>Norway</th>
<th>Finland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urbanization</td>
<td>1.15 (.80)</td>
<td>.61 (.72)</td>
<td>7.30 (3.56) **</td>
<td>3.83 (2.57) **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magnitude</td>
<td>.07 (.15)</td>
<td>.05 (.03) **</td>
<td>.07 (.05) **</td>
<td>.15 (.05) **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seats of the left</td>
<td>-.10 (.08)</td>
<td>.15 (.02) ***</td>
<td>.13 (.02) ***</td>
<td>-.05 (.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women in labor force</td>
<td>.47 (.24)</td>
<td>.02 (.07)</td>
<td>.07 (.11)</td>
<td>-.17 (.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Periphery</td>
<td>-4.98 (2.20) *</td>
<td>-2.43 (.75) **</td>
<td>-.74 (.92) **</td>
<td>-3.28 (1.66) *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>11.14 (19.98)</td>
<td>36.43 (6.69) ***</td>
<td>25.74 (9.19) **</td>
<td>55.75 (19.06) **</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

R² = 0.21 0.15 0.09 0.11

Note: For specification of the variables, see Table 4-8. A collinearity test shows that no VIP values are above 2. Sources: See Table 4-8.

At least four conclusions can be drawn from Table 9. First, it can be seen there is a difference between the countries in regard to the role of the political parties. Whereas in Norway and Sweden the traditional and expected pattern of the presence of left wing parties as a driver in regards to women’s representation is clearly found, this is not at all the case in Denmark and Finland.

Secondly, it can be seen that the two other usual suspects, when explanations for variations in women’s legislative presence are sought, district magnitude and level of women in the labor force fare even worse in the models. They might for some time have been considered important when explaining differences between single member and multi-member constituencies and differences between countries, respectively, but in this study on local assemblies they do not really contribute significantly to our understanding of where women obtain representation in local politics.

Thirdly, and probably most importantly in this paper, is the finding that geography do matter. The more urbanized the area and the closer to the center of the country the more women are found at the council. The two geographical variables contributes more to the explanation of women’s numerical representation than the traditional size variable simply using the number of inhabitants living within the borders of the municipality (as in the Smith et al. article quoted in the introduction). The urbanization and peripheral status variables are correlated and therefore it is interesting – and somewhat surprising – to learn from Table 9 than when
both are included in the models, the peripheral status of a municipality actually do a better job explaining women’s presence than level of urbanization.

And fourthly, it should indeed be noted that across the four countries the explanatory power of the models are not impressive. What we have basically done is that we have taken some of the most well demonstrated explanatory variables from analyses of women’s representation and used them in sub-national analyses in four different countries which each are quite homogeneous (allowing us to hold a lot of factors constant) trying to explain substantial intra-country variation in women’s representation but we end up with quite a lot of this variation still unexplained. An important take home lesson for scholars of women in politics should be that we are still quite far from fully understanding the mechanisms in women’s political representation. Local politics seems like a promising hunting ground for scholars of women in politics but since the traditional explanations cannot account for most of the variation, we need to come up with more potential explanations to why women in some localities gets very well represented while the opposite is indeed the case in others.

A closer look at Denmark

While this paper has demonstrated that geography matter this also means that an understanding of the more specific geographic patterns of a given country would probably be needed to move the analysis further. It might be that differences exist between the areas of Finland with a Swedish speaking minority and the rest of the country? Maybe the “bible belt” in the Southern part of Norway forms a special case. Or perhaps the geographical very large municipalities in Northern Sweden deviate from the rest of the country? One has to study the geographical specifics of the different countries very detailed to be able to answer such questions. The geographical patterns within a country can tell us about the social and cultural differences very often embedded in these.

To demonstrate how a more detailed analysis of a specific country and its geography can work let us take a look at the smallest of the four countries, Denmark. Figure 1 below shows a map of Denmark with the percentage of women on the local councils. The large black dot in the far eastern part of the country is the capital Copenhagen. We also see municipalities
close to the capital of Copenhagen demonstrate quite high levels of women’s representation compared to the rest of the country.

Figure 1. The percentage of women on local councils in the 98 Danish municipalities after the 2009 local elections.

These suburban municipalities right outside the capital are actually quite different from the rest of the country since many of them were not included in the major amalgamation reform of Danish municipalities in 2005 and they are all in commuting distance to Copenhagen which means that they are not only primarily residential but also that considerable segregation along occupation and class lines has evolved out of people choosing where to live. In the rest of the country such differences was more or less swept away when urban and rural municipalities were merged as a consequence of the amalgamation reforms, where 271 municipalities were reduced to 98. So in these suburban municipalities a clearer pattern is found in regard to resident segregation compared to the rest of the country. Some of these municipalities are predominantly traditional working class communities with councils dominated by leftist parties not least the socialdemocratic party, while others are inhabited by very affluent upper class professionals and in political terms very conservative strongholds. And here comes the surprise: some of the municipalities in Denmark with the highest
percentage of women at the council are found in these affluent conservative municipalities, whereas some of the working class socialdemocratic strongholds actually elect councils with very few women. This pattern is indeed interesting in terms of the gender roles in different communities – the traditional working class family where the man takes care of business outside the house including politics and the traditional conservative family where the women gets involved in the organizations of the local community. But in Denmark this pattern evolves only in the suburbs to the capital since this is the only area where residential segregation along class lines is somewhat in existence.

This leads us to revise the model explaining women’s representation in Danish local councils. District magnitude and women in the labor force are left out but the geographical and partisan variables have been altered to take these specifics about the geographical and partisan hypothesis into account. As for the geographical variables urbanization is still included but instead of the peripheral variable only a dummy measuring if the municipality is among the 26 which is located at the outskirts of the capital is included. As it can be seen from Table 10 it turns out that both these variables comes out significantly and that they both effect women’s descriptive representation in a positive way. As for the party composition two dummies are included, one for the approximately one third of the municipalities with the lowest percentage of seats held by socialists (less than 40 percent) and one with the approximately one third of the municipalities with the highest percentage of seats held by socialists (more than 60 percent) (municipalities with between 40 and 60 percent socialists is reference group). As Table 10 demonstrates none of these dummies are significant, however it should be noticed that the sign of both is positive and the coefficient for the high socialist municipalities is by far the highest. Denmark still does not fit into the usual left party explanation but this result is at least a little less peculiar than the negative sign in Table 9. Most importantly, however, is that it is now possible to include two interaction variables combining the municipality being close to the capital and having either a very low or a very high percentage of socialist councilors. Table 10 demonstrates that the conservative municipalities in the capital suburbs do have relatively high percentage of women at the council (although this relationship is not statistically significant) and that the traditionally working class socialist dominated municipalities in the same area have a relatively low percentage of women at the council (and this is statistically significant).
Table 10. Percentage of women at the council in Denmark explained by geographical and party explanations. OLS regression. Beta coefficients (standard errors in parentheses).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Denmark</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urbanization</td>
<td>1.63 (.64)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban to the capital</td>
<td>6.07 (2.62)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;40% seats won by socialists</td>
<td>.64 (2.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;60% seats won by socialists</td>
<td>7.64 (4.91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban capital × &lt;40% socialists</td>
<td>5.69 (4.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban capital × &gt;60% socialists</td>
<td>-12.98 (6.30)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>28.80 (1.16)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion and conclusions

As is often the case, sub disciplines within political science do not always talk with and to each other – this is also in many ways the case when it comes to the subfields “women and politics” and “urban politics”. In this paper we have tried to do exactly this and have taken the study of women’s descriptive representation to the local level and studied how women do at the legislatures in different urban (and rural) settings. The conclusion is twofold, namely 1) that there does seem to be a geographical dimension to the level of women’s presence in political bodies, and 2) that these patterns can be quite hard fully to disentangle not just from other dimensions, such as the partisan composition of the councils but, also between the variables measuring different dimensions of geography. In this paper we have presented preliminary results from an analysis of the four Scandinavian countries Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland, demonstrating that not least the distance to the political/cultural/economic center of the country accounts for some of the variation in women’s representation. Cultural and economic modernization is known to facilitate voting for and thereby representation by women (Holli and Wass, 2010: 605) and according to a Rokkanian logic this means that more women should be present the closer to the capital we get.

While this is the general finding from this paper which can be included in future studies, it should also be emphasized – as the more detailed analysis of the Danish case demonstrates – that geographical patterns in women’s representation can be complicated and not at all easy to grasp. Therefore, studies of women and politics at the local level should not only include
geographical variables but also try to do so in a sophisticated way where the differences between areas and regions in a given country are taken into account.

We invite our colleagues to try to exploit the possibilities presented by the rich data on local politics by moving to cases beyond Scandinavia. Even though, in times of globalization, some say that geography is becoming irrelevant, our take is the opposite. It might be that geography matters less but it still matters to some degree. By taking geography into account we can learn more about what helps and hinder women in their quest for political office.
References


Kjaer, Ulrik (1999): Saturation Without Parity: The Stagnating Number of Female Councillors in Denmark, in: Beukel, Erik, Klausen, Kurt Klaudi & Mouritzen, Poul Erik...


Trimble, Linda, Jane Arscott & Manon Tremblay (eds.) (2013): “Stalled - The Representation of Women in Canadian Governments”.


Notes

1 Technically speaking Iceland is also a Nordic country, but since the data availability is not as good for this country it has not been included in the paper.
2 Without denigrating the differences across the countries there are significant similarities across these four countries meaning we can hold constant a number of cultural, religious, and historical factors.
3 Cube root law of assembly sizes (Taagepera, 1972: 391).
4 Smith et al. also do this.