Patterns of Inter-Level Gender Gaps in Women’s Descriptive Representation

Kjær, Ulrik

Published in:
Lex localis - Journal of Local Self-Government

DOI:
10.4335/17.1.53-70(2019)

Publication date:
2019

Document version
Early version, also known as pre-print

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

• Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
• You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
• You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Take down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim. Please direct all enquiries to puresupport@bib.sdu.dk
Ulrik Kjaer (2019): “Patterns of Inter-Level Gender Gaps in Women’s Descriptive Representation”

LEX LOCALIS - JOURNAL OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT Vol. 17, No. 1, pp. 53 - 70

https://doi.org/10.4335/17.1.53-70(2019)

Patterns of Inter-Level Gender Gaps in Women’s Descriptive Representation

Abstract

It is often assumed that women’s descriptive representation is higher at the local level than at the state or federal level. However, recent studies challenge this perceived pattern. Therefore, several alternative patterns of inter-level gender gaps in female representation across political levels are systematically introduced. Zooming in on the state-local gender gap, a number of explanations as to why such a gender gap can emerge are hypothesized. And the case of the U.S. is used to illustrate how women sometimes fare relatively better at state than local election.
Introduction

At least since Tocqueville, the school-of-democracy argument for having lower level governments – that local governments provide opportunities for “political education” (Mill quoted in Pratchett, 2004: 360) – has been prominent (Sharpe, 1970: 155). Especially for groups that are traditionally underrepresented in politics, lower levels of government constitute an important platform for entering politics and for gaining experience and political skills that can help them move up the political ladder and win higher political office. The potential of the local political level as a training field early in a political career has been emphasized as especially beneficial to women (Magin, 2011: 37), who can use lower office as a stepping stone to higher office at the state or federal level (Palmer & Simon, 2003: 128). According to this “pipeline theory” (Mariani, 2008), “the number of women who serve in local office is a critical indicator of the number of women who will be seen as credible candidates for higher office” (Duerst-Lahti, 1998: 15). This perception of local politics as an important pipeline for women’s representation at the state and federal level levels is widespread (e.g. Adams & Schreiber, 2011: 84; Carroll & Sanbonmatsu, 2013: 13; O’Connor, 2008: 233; Pini & McDonald, 2011: 1; Ransford & Thompson, 2011: 21; Thames & Williams, 2013: 5).

It is a bit surprising – not to say peculiar – that women in local political office mostly seem to be interesting if and when they leave local office to pursue a career at state or federal level. It is equally surprising that the high hopes for local politics as an incubator for female state legislators and members of national parliaments exist without any substantial empirical backing of the first prerequisite for this mechanism to work, namely that women are relatively well represented at the local level. It is often assumed that women’s descriptive representation is higher at the local level than at higher levels of office (e.g. Crowder-Meyer, 2013: 399; Darcy et al., 1994: 33; Randall, 1982: 74; Clark, 1991: 67), but our understanding of these patterns and the factors that shape them is not very strong. Studies including women’s representation at several level are rare. The
traditional assumption was seriously questioned in 2010 by a study of the 27 EU countries demonstrating, that while women’s representation was higher in local councils than in parliament in 15 countries, the opposite pattern was found in nine countries (with an equal percentage at the local and the national level in the remaining three countries) (Kjaer, 2010). Other studies have since got to the same finding, demonstrating that women are not better represented at lower political levels in Italy and Poland (Ortbals et al., 2012) and Germany (Eder et al., 2016).

However, even though the traditional pattern of women’s representation at different political levels has been challenged, alternative patterns have not yet been theorized upon in a comprehensive way. In this article, we will take upon this task and systematically depict the patterns which can emerge when women’s descriptive representation is compared across political levels within the same national context. While this is the main contribution of the article, we will supplement the discussion of different patterns by focusing specifically at the gap in women’s representation at the state and the local level and hypothesize potential mechanisms behind such gap. While these hypotheses are generic, they have been developed not least on the basis of the literature and the first empirical data covering the case of the U.S. The U.S. case will not only be used to generate hypotheses (George & Bennett, 2004: 20) but also, in the last part of the article, as an illustrative case describing how the state-local gender gap can be investigated by comparing the percentage of women at the local and the state level not by looking at country-wide aggregates but by state-wide values. The U.S. is chosen because it is probably the country where the traditional pattern has so far been challenged the least, and hence where the importance of pointing out alternative patterns in women’s representation across political levels seems most critical.

Different patterns of women’s inter-level descriptive representation
In spite of emerging empirical evidence, we still do not have the full picture of how women’s descriptive representation varies across different political levels (such as local, state and federal). However, the traditional saying has been that we should expect to find a smaller share of women in office as we move upwards in the political hierarchy. Rein Taagepera has explicitly hypothesized and formulated this pattern as the “law of minority attrition”, whereby “women … proportions decrease as the level of political office increases” (Taagepera, 1994: 235). Taagepera includes different levels within the same polity (the legislative and the executive branches) as well as different polities at different levels (such as local councils, state legislatures, and Congress). Instead of mixing the two dimensions, a pattern of fewer women at the top levels within a given polity will be denoted “intra-polity women attrition” (see also Kjaer & Kosiara-Pedersen, forthcoming) and a pattern of fewer women at higher than at lower levels of political legislatures “inter-polity women attrition”. Even though Taagepera is not clear on this distinction, he is definitely aligned with the pipeline theory discussed above: “If nationwide politicians largely emerge through the intermediary stage of local politics, increased participation on that level also widens the base of the pyramid” (Taagepera, 1994: 243).

To illustrate the pyramid metaphor, and the line of thinking behind inter-polity attrition in regard to women’s representation, we will use the U.S. state of Massachusetts as an example. In 2012, the percentage of women in the state’s congressional delegation to the 112th U.S. Congress was 8.3 percent (one of twelve delegates was female, namely Niki Tsongas (House-Democrat)). In the State Legislature of Massachusetts, 49 (House 38, Senate 11) of the 200 members (House 160, Senate 40) were women, corresponding to 24.5 percent. So when we go down one level, we find a 16.2 percentage point increase in women’s representation. According to the law of attrition, we should find an even higher proportion of women if we go down another level to local politics. The law does not specify how much higher, but if we for illustrational purposes simply extrapolate the
increase between federal and state level we should expect four out of ten local councilors to be women (40.7 percent) and arrive at the perfect pyramidal pattern illustrated in Figure 1 (the length of each bar corresponds to the percentage of women).

*** INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE ***

The State of Massachusetts was not chosen randomly as illustration. It is one of the few states in the U.S. where data on women’s representation at the local level is collected, and according to a 2012 count, 20.8 percent of all seats in local councils in the state were held by women (Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy, 2012). This means that rather than the expected pyramidal pattern, a more diamond-like pattern can be observed when the actual percentage of women is included at the local council level (fewer women at the top and at the bottom of the hierarchy than in the middle). The State of Massachusetts might be an outlying case, but the finding that the percentage of women officeholders is lower at the local than at the state level should, as pointed out, raise some caution as far as accepting the pyramidal pattern originating from the attrition mechanism as a law.

The pyramidal pattern cannot be a default, and other potential patterns need to be considered as well. In a three-level context, a theoretical distinction can be made between no less than nine such patterns, which we depict in Figure 2 in very stylized form. The traditional pyramid pattern are supplemented with eight other patterns which we will denote the diamond pattern (the one observed, although not as clear-cut, in the Massachusetts case); the spearhead, i.e. the percentage of women is the same at state and local level (but both higher than at the congressional level); the lampshade where women do best at the local level but equally at the state and federal level; the pillar, which means that women’s representation does not differ at all across the three levels; the
nib, where women are doing better, and equally well, at the two higher levels; the hourglass, i.e.,
the congressional and the local levels return the highest percentage of women; the torch, which
means that the highest level of women is found at the congressional level and a lower (but identical
lower) level is found at the state and the local level; and finally the funnel, i.e., the higher up in the
inter-level hierarchy the more women, which is the opposite of the pyramid.

*** INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE ***

Again, these nine patterns are very stylized and it will probably be difficult to find as neat and
precise patterns on real-world data. Studies including all three levels of government in a country are
very rare. A study of Germany finds (without denoting it that way) a diamond-pattern in 2005 and a
nib-pattern in 2009 (Eder et al. 2016), while a Canadian study finds a pillar-like pattern where the
level of women’s representation is more or less similar across the three levels (federal, provincial,
municipal) (Tolley, 2011).

We will return to the U.S. case in more detail later but if we already now look at the U.S.
state by state, a pattern for each state can be detected as it was done for Massachusetts in Figure 1 (a
comparison of the gender composition of the congressional delegation and the state legislature for
each state shows that in the 114th Congress women’s representation is highest in the state legislature
in 33 of the 50 states). One of the few other states with data on the local level is New Hampshire,
the first state to send an all women delegation to Congress (after the 2012 election all four delegates
were women). 32.8 percent of the seats in the State Legislature were held by women, and “women
were 20 percent of city and town councils and boards of aldermen and selectmen” (Thomas, 2014:
7). Therefore, in New Hampshire the least expected of the nine patterns depicted in Figure 2 was
found in 2012, namely the funnel. Keep in mind, however, that in some states the congressional
delegation consists of very few persons – in New Hampshire only four – making percentages quite sensitive. We will, therefore, in the next section (also to simplify the discussion) focus on the lowest half of the figures – the comparison of women’s descriptive representation at the state and the local level, respectively. How do we explain potential differences in women’s descriptive representation at these two levels?

Hypothesizing the representational state-local gender gap

This section focuses on the “state-local gender gap”, the potential difference in women’s descriptive representation at the state and at the local level, respectively. The term is coined with inspiration from Vengroff et al.’s study of the “national-meso gender gap”, i.e., in the U.S. case the difference between congress and state legislatures (2003: 168). The state-local gender gap varies across states and the nature of the variation and the mechanisms that create it are subject to different hypotheses.

The percentage of women at the two levels may be more or less the same, as in the spearhead pattern (and the pillar and the torch) or they may differ. According to the pyramid (and the hourglass and hat) pattern, women’s representation can be expected to be lower at state than at local level, and in the diamond (and funnel and nib) pattern we can expect relatively more women at state than at local level (see Figure 2).

In Figure 3 the different patterns in the state-local gender gap are illustrated by plotting a number of dots in a diagram where the level of women’s descriptive representation in the state legislature and the councils within the same state are the X- and the Y-axis, respectively (also the X=Y line is included). These are fictional data points included to illustrate the potential patterns. Since we will in the next section use the U.S. as a case, Figure 3 includes 50 dots illustrating the 50 American states.
Three clusters can be identified in Figure 3 illustrating each of the three patterns just mentioned. We denote the three state-local gender gaps "copycat”, ”women’s place is in the council” and "old boys’ local network”. As far as the mechanisms that produce each of these patterns, a number of hypotheses can be put forward.

The “copycat” pattern

In the “copycat” pattern in Figure 3, women’s representation is more or less equal in the local councils and the state legislature in a given state. There is no state-local gender gap.

Explanation 1: Politics is the same across levels. The historical, cultural, and institutional characteristics of a given state which explain the percentage of women in its state legislature are also at play at the local elections returning a more or less similar percentage of women councilors.

The “women's place is in the council” pattern

"Women’s place is in the council” represents the traditional pyramid pattern based on inter-level women attrition (upper left part of the figure). According to the theory of gender-office congruency, “certain political offices align more readily with still-existing gender stereotypes, making those offices easier to obtain” (Lawrence & Rose, 2014: 71). At least three such explanations of why this gap should appear are consistently found in the literature (Adams and Schreiber, 2011: 84; Tremblay & Mévellec, 2013: 19):
Explanation 2: Proximity. Since City Hall is on average closer to home than the State Capitol it makes it easier for the primary caretaker of home and hearth to participate in local vs. state politics, and since women are still on average more responsible for household work in the U.S., women will have relatively higher representation in local politics. The claim that proximity makes it possible for women to ”participate in the local government while at the same time fulfilling their other roles” (Darcy et al., 1994: 11) is a common explanation (Clark, 1991: 66; Pini & McDonald, 2011: 1; Randall, 1982: 87).

Local politics is not only closer to women’s home but also to their ”heart”, which leads us to another potential explanation of why women’s representation should be relatively higher in local politics.

Explanation 3: Extension of traditional women’s roles. Since local politics concerns policy areas closer to domestic issues (neighborhood planning, social issues, local transportation and utilities) it is seen as closer to women’s traditional role as prime caretaker in the families. The argument has a supply as well as a demand side; on the supply side it is claimed that women are more interested in policy areas at the local level, while the demand side claims that women are better at handling, for instance, social policy (Clark, 1991: 66; Crowder-Meyer, 2013: 399; Darcy et al., 1994: 11; Tremblay & Mévellec, 2013: 19).

The demand side is in focus in the last potential explanation of why more women are involved in local than in state politics.

Explanation 4: Lower entry barriers. Since local politics are usually assigned less power and less prestige than state politics, the entry barriers will be lower and it will be easier for traditionally underrepresented groups such as women to gain representation.
It has been argued that a higher percentage of women can be expected in local than in state politics since it is easier to reach City Hall (Magin, 2011: 37; Tremblay & Mévellec, 2013: 19) and ”women are more likely to gain seats with less prestige and power” (Regulska et al., 1991: 204). There is less competition at the local level and lower entry barriers (less expensive campaigns, less intrusive media, part-time positions etc. (van Assendelft, 2014: 214)).

*The "old boys’ local network" pattern*

However, the proposed explanations for a state-local gender gap with women proportionally better represented at the local level are very essentialist in their view on women and on gender relations in the family and society at large (Tremblay & Mévellec, 2013: 20). The existence of some of these structural and norm-based gender differences will not be discarded, but just as the extent to which they permeate contemporary American society can be questioned, their possible impact on the state-local gender gap can be challenged. Therefore, also the third possible relationship between women’s representation at the state and the local level should be considered, namely that women are better represented at the state level (lower right corner of Figure 3); a pattern which we will denote ”old boys’ local network”.

Again there are a number of possible explanations. First, local politics differs from state politics because it is more traditional and based on traditional networks. Local politics is dominated by leading figures in a community and they are traditionally male.

Explanation 5: Traditionalistic circles of power. In local politics trends of professionalization, symbolic representation, political merit systems etc. have not been applied to the same extent as in state politics and therefore the recruitment process is still dominated by the local old boys’ network, leaving less room for an increase in women’s representation.
For better and for worse, local politics can be seen to be more traditional keeping alive a quite male-dominated political life. This is not to claim that local politics is underdeveloped, but the understanding of politics as being in good hands with the traditional elite (typically dominated by men) might tend to live longer at the local level. With the lower degree of awareness about the gender question at the local level, women’s low representation may tend to go “under the radar”.

Another pronounced difference between state and local politics is that elections to the state legislatures tend to be politicized with the two major parties dominating the elections, whereas the opposite is found at the local level. Most local elections are non-partisan, but it is of course debatable whether some of these non-partisan candidates still sympathize with the Democrats or the Republicans and if their leaning is known to the voters.

Explanation 6: Non-partisan elections. Since local elections are far more often non-partisan than elections to the state legislatures, one potential forum for discussing gender balance and ultimately recruiting women as candidates is lacking.

This is not at all to say that the major parties promote women and that women advance their electoral fortunes within the parties – sometimes on the contrary. But as a recent study demonstrates, women are less likely than men to be self-starters and often need to be encouraged to run, for instance by party recruiters (Carroll & Sanbonmatsu, 2013). The widespread lack of party recruiters in the nomination processes for local offices may therefore create a state-local gender gap in favor of men. However, other studies argue that the effect of partisan election can be more mixed; some recruiters can have traditionalistic views on gender parity and efforts to recruit women may vary based on the recruiters’ gender (Crowder-Meyer, 2013).

Additional patterns
If one of the six proposed explanations turns out to be very powerful we would end up in a situation where the value of the state-local gender gap would be the same in all 50 states. Some explanations would predict a more varied outcome across states with more women at the state level than at the local level in some states, and vice versa in other states (see Figure 3). Depending on the specific pattern, different potential explanations can be proposed.

The pattern formed by the 50 states in Figure 3 is one, where there are more women at the local level than at the state level when women’s representation at the state level is relatively low, whereas the opposite (fewer women at the local level) is the case when women’s representation at the state level is relatively high. One explanation for this specific pattern could be that when women in some states mobilize and win elections, they increasingly go for the most powerful offices.

Explanation 7: Progress whets women’s appetite for the most powerful offices. Where women are successful in gaining political offices across levels, they will raise their ambitions and increasingly go after the higher level offices such as the state legislatures instead of "only" focusing on local office.

Women are rarely invited to and can rarely get access to the power game, but when they progress, their ambitions increase correspondingly and they direct their attention and electoral bids to the most powerful of the political levels.

Another possible explanation for the total pattern illustrated in Figure 3 could be related to women’s different level of participation in the workforce across states.

Explanation 8: Politics as a triple shift for women. The more women participate in the labor force in a state, the more involved they become in society, their chances of being viewed positively among party recruiters and voters increase and they will obtain higher representation in the state legislature. However, it can be relatively more difficult for women
to find time for local politics because its non-paid amateur form for some women means "a triple shift" (in addition to family and paid work). Since being a politician at the state level is more often professionalized, the attractiveness of state office versus local office varies by state according to the labor force involvement.

This mechanism has also been labeled the beruf effect in accordance with Weber’s ideas of politics as a beruf (vocation) (Kjaer, 2010). It has been claimed that a more professionalized legislature will automatically attract fewer women as members (Thames & Williams, 2013: 42). However, it might also work the other way around as it can be advantageous to women if a professionalized political career can take paid work out of the equation.

The dotting of the 50 states in Figure 3 is just an example; other patterns with simultaneous dots on both sides of (and at some distance from) the diagonal are of course also possible. Likewise, the mechanisms causing such variation in the state-local gender gap can be many. There may be differences between red and blue states, between southern, northern, eastern and western states, between more or less religious states etc.

**A first empirical look at the U.S. state-local gender gap**

To illustrate how the state-local gender gap looks when calculated state-wise and not just in the aggregate for an entire country we have chosen to take a closer look at the U.S. case. Not because data are readily available, on the contrary. But because there is a lot of municipalities and states in the country and that the traditional assumption that women fare better at elections for local than for state-wise office has hitherto not been questioned.

The exact gender composition of the councils and boards of the 36,011 general purpose municipalities and townships or for that matter the 50,432 special purpose districts in the U.S. (Leland & Whisman, 2014: 416) is unknown. Exact and updated numbers exist for the U.S.
Congress and the state legislatures, not least due to the continuous and tireless monitoring conducted by the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP 2017). Women’s descriptive representation in Congress and in the state legislatures is 19.4 percent (104 of the 535 members of the 115th Congress) and 24.8% (1,832 of the 7,383 state legislators), respectively (CAWP 2017). Sanbonmatsu’s pioneering work has also demonstrated some of the patterns in the cross-state variation (e.g. Carroll & Sanbonmatsu, 2013; Sanbonmatsu, 2006). In contrast, aggregate data on local governments for the entire country has traditionally been and remains in short supply (Fox, 2011: 96; Paxton et al., 2007: 275; Smith et al., 2012: 316; van Assendelft, 2014: 200) and gendered analyses of local elections are rare (Adams & Schreiber, 2011: 83, see, however, e.g. Bullock & MacManus, 1991; Lee, 1977; Trounstine & Valdini, 2008).

Hints in recent studies are confined to certain local government sizes (Smith et al., 2012) or certain geographical areas (Ransford & Thompson, 2011). The latest edition of the book *Women in Elective Office* (Thomas & Wilcox, 2014) claims in the chapter on local politics that “women comprise approximately 28 percent of city councils” (van Assendelft, 2014: 200). However, the author relies on an approximation, and not necessarily a very precise one; the number comes from the National League of Cities and even though it is the most updated number available from its homepage it is from 2001. And this “2001 study is based on a mail questionnaire completed by a random sample of 664 council members in cities with populations of 25,000 and higher” (Woodwell et al., 2003).

To test the different hypotheses, we need data on the independent variables used in each of the proposed explanations and not least on the dependent variable: the state-local gender gap. We have data on the gender composition of the state legislatures, but not on women’s descriptive representation at the local level, and this dearth of data at the local level for entire states prevents us
from performing empirical testing of the hypotheses proposed. However, even though we cannot plot all 50 states we do have information about the state-local gender gap for a few states. In addition to the Massachusetts case of 2012 used in Figure 1, we have information on the other New England states from data collected in 2009 on local governments in Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont (reported in Ransford & Thompson, 2011). Data for Florida was collected in 2004 (MacManus et al., 2006), and more recently a study reports data from New Jersey on the gender composition of all 3,111 councilors in the state’s 565 local governments (Kjaer et al., 2015). These eight data points are pictured in Figure 4. It should be noticed that the data are not from the exact same point of time so that potential trends are not taken into account.

*** INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE ***

The admittedly very scarce data presented in Figure 4 suggests a state-local gender gap in the U.S. in women’s descriptive representation and the sign of this gap is in favor of the state legislatures. Except for the Florida case, all data points are found in the ”old boys’ local network” area of the figure, where the percentage of women is higher in the state legislatures than in the local councils. This is somewhat surprising; at least if the traditional pyramidal pattern suggested by Taagepera, and the idea of inter-polity women attrition, is considered valid. Taagepera would have expected most of the data points to be in the ”women’s place is in the council” area of the figure, but this is not the case. We do not have enough data to analyze the mechanism producing the pattern found in Figure 4 and to explain the variation in the state-local gender gap – a number of hypotheses have been put forward in this article but a test has to await improvement of the data situation and further research.
Conclusion

The underwood of local offices is in many countries under-researched in regard to women’s descriptive representation. Studies with focus on women in local government are conducted, and more and more so, in countries around the world. However, so far only very few studies have “multi-levelled” the gender-analysis comparing the percentage of women elected for local office to the percentage of women at higher political levels (Kjaer, 2010; Ortbal et al., 2011; Eder et al., 2016). When the percentages of women at different political levels are compared, the traditional view that women are numerically better represented in local offices than in state legislatures, has been challenged. In this article, we have systematically described patterns of women’s representation across political levels. Not just to take the local government level – and the many people serving in local offices – seriously. But also because such analyses can enhance our general understanding of why women have such a hard time obtaining equal representation in political bodies and help us identify where in the political recruitment process women lose ground.

It has been hypothesized that women’s representation sometimes ”stagnates” (Magin, 2011: 21) because party recruiters reach ”saturation before parity” (Kjaer, 1999). The recruiters have many traits that they would like to see presented among their candidates (gender, age, race, education, occupation, geography etc.) and they might ”tick off” gender once a certain threshold (although not 50 percent) is reached. This tick-off effect might also kick in with regard to women’s representation in local politics; if party recruiters think that women are relatively well represented at the local level, their attention might drift to campaigns and races for offices at higher levels.

However, as described in this article the first figures suggest that gender might have been ticked off
prematurely in regard to local politics and it might not be warranted to direct attention almost exclusively to higher levels of political office.

And let us not forget the pipeline theory discussed in the introduction: “[W]omen’s representation in higher level offices, such as state legislative, statewide, and congressional, will not increase or reach parity if the numbers of serving on the city and town councils, boards of selectmen, boards of aldermen and other local governing bodies do not increase substantially and more expeditiously” (Ransford & Thompson, 2011: 21). If we believe that local politics is potentially an effective pipeline for women it is worth checking if this pipeline is somewhat plugged up.

In some countries attention is paid to the question of whether a woman at some point can become president and crack this “ultimate glass ceiling”? (Thomas, 2014: 22). It is of course very interesting to focus on this glass ceiling and see how high women can get in the political hierarchy. However, the abovementioned study of women in New Jersey local politics also demonstrates that, there are no women in the local council in 136 of the 565 municipalities (24.1 percent) in the state (Kjaer et al., 2015). So getting women included in politics may be a problem at both the top and the bottom of the political hierarchy. The difference is that we can see through the glass ceiling how few women make it to the top, but we cannot at the moment see through the concrete floor and into local politics.

Research on women and politics at the state level has grown in the past decade or so and there is now a much better understanding of how women get there and how they conduct political representation (e.g. Carroll & Sanbonmatsu, 2013; Osborn, 2012; Sanbonmatsu, 2006). Improving the data situation on the local level could make an expansion to the local level possible (see also Marschall et al., 2011) – and according to a prominent women and politics scholar: ”A[n] … area in need of future research is the role of gender in local electoral politics” (Fox, 2011: 96). If the local
level can become more included in gender research the exact picture of the state-local gender gap can be painted and exploited to learn more about the mechanisms behind women’s descriptive underrepresentation. Comparative analyses are often promoted and scholars therefore often plunge into comparing nations. However, cross-national research has its complications and comparing different political levels within a federal state, for instance state and local governments, should therefore be considered more often. We will call for more empirical studies looking for the different patterns of women’s descriptive representation described and not least for studies trying to test the hypotheses put forward as to why higher female representation is sometimes found at the higher and not the lower political levels.

References


Fox, R. L (2011) Studying Gender in U.S. Politics: Where Do We Go from Here?, *Politics & Gender*, 7(1), pp. 94–99.


Figure 1. The percentage of women at different level of politics in the state of Massachusetts 2012.

Congressional delegation:

State Legislature:

Local councils/boards:

Note: The full lines depict the actual figures, whereas the dotted line depicts a fictional percentage extrapolated according to the law of minority attrition (percentage in parentheses).
Figure 2: Different patterns of women’s representation across Federal congress, State legislature, and Local councils

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Federal congress</th>
<th>State legislature</th>
<th>Local councils</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pyramid</td>
<td>Lampshade</td>
<td>Hourglass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spearhead</td>
<td>Pillar</td>
<td>Torch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diamond</td>
<td>Nib</td>
<td>Funnel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 3: Different patterns of the state-local gender gap
Figure 4: The state-local gender gap in selected states

Note: Legends – CT (Connecticut), FL (Florida), ME (Maine), MA (Massachusetts), NH (New Hampshire), NJ (New Jersey), RI (Rhode Island) and VT (Vermont).
Sources: Local councils in Massachusetts – Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy (2012); local councils in CT, ME, NH, RI and VT 2009 – Ransford & Thompson (2011); local councils in NJ – Kjaer et al. (2015); local councils in FL – MacManus et al. (2006); State legislatures – Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University.