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Editorial

Women Opposition Leaders: Conceptual Issues and Empirical Agendas

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Abstract

This thematic issue provides the first comprehensive overview of women opposition leaders and their performance. Setting the stage for a new research agenda, this editorial piece integrates theoretical and empirical insights at the intersection of three distinct research areas: political opposition, political leadership, and gender and politics. It discusses various notions of opposition leaders and identifies three main lines of inquiry: (a) career pathways and trajectories, (b) patterns of selection and de-selection, and (c) the actual and perceived performance of women's oppositional leadership. Applying a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches, this collection of original articles captures the diversity of women opposition leaders, their career trajectories, and their exercise of leadership across different political regimes and world regions.

Keywords

autocracy; democracy; gender; leadership performance; opposition leaders; parliaments; political opposition; regime type; Westminster model; women

Issue

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1. The Three Sources of a New Agenda

This thematic issue combines several areas of international political research that have risen to major prominence in recent years into a novel and increasingly important agenda. The first of those areas concerns political oppositions, which, following Dahl's seminal work from the 1960s (Dahl, 1966), has been rediscovered more recently and developed into a complex field now covering both democratic and autocratic regimes (Helms, 2021, 2022). There is an increasing awareness that the quality of democracy rests to a considerable extent on the state of the political opposition and that even the performance of regimes beyond liberal democracy is to a large degree shaped by political oppositions of various natures.

The second growth sector of recent political research with immediate relevance for the research gathered in this thematic issue relates to political leaders and lead-

ership. There are both scholarly reasons and real-world triggers, including a global trend towards personalization and constant calls for more and better leadership, that have given rise to a full-blown research paradigm centering on leaders and leadership in comparative perspective (see, e.g., Foley, 2013; Helms, 2012; Rhodes & 't Hart, 2014). While many contemporary scholars tend to conceive of leadership as a complex social relationship between “leaders” and “followers,” rather than something “leaders do,” few if any would deny the importance of leaders for the cause of leadership. Recent chapters of political leadership research have come to focus on issues of leaders' performance (see, e.g., Müller, 2020; Strangio et al., 2013), yet questions of leadership selection, de-selection, and succession have remained crucially important subjects in their own right (Helms, 2020a).

This is particularly true if political leaders and leadership are looked at from a gender perspective, which

marks the third major area of research to which this thematic issue's agenda is dedicated to. While gender is, by definition, about more than women, and not all gender research is of a feminist nature, feminist perspectives on women in politics have long marked the core of gender research in political science. Perhaps ironically, many key works in that field have focused on women leaders—or their conspicuous absence, for that matter—in the executive branch, which has been early on identified as “arguably the most masculine” political territory of all (Jalalzai, 2008, p. 209). There is now a burgeoning literature on women presidents and prime ministers, women cabinet ministers, and leading women executives at the supranational and international levels (see, e.g., Annesley et al., 2019; Haack, 2022; Jalalzai, 2013; Krook & O'Brien, 2012; Martin & Borelli, 2016; Müller & Tömmel, 2022; Müller-Rommel & Vercesi, 2017). Also, apparently driven by the increasing politicization of this issue, in many countries the share of women government ministers and political chief executives has significantly risen in recent years.

In light of these dynamics and developments, which could be expected to have prompted a real blossom of comparative political research into women opposition leaders and oppositional leadership, it is remarkable to see that issues of women leaders and leadership relating to political opposition have continued to be largely ignored. There is some isolated work on women opposition leaders or, strictly speaking, on how women get to power within their respective parties (see, e.g., Beckwith, 2015; Clemens, 2006), but its scarcity only underscores the need for a much more comprehensive exploration of a complex and fascinating topic. The fact that this occasional work has tended to focus on individual opposition leaders, such as Margaret Thatcher or Angela Merkel, who eventually became long-term prime ministers or chancellors respectively, testifies to the particular “spell” that executive power has had on the community of gender scholars, just as on many scholars pursuing other approaches.

2. Conceptual Issues

There are quite a few challenges of comparative political research in this field, some of which start right at the level of conceptualizing “opposition leaders.” Obviously, the origin of the term and concept is the British Westminster democracy, with its strictly parliament-centered tradition of politics and governance (and its more particular tradition of an opposition with a capital “O”). In British politics, opposition leaders are not only parliament-based actors, they are also party leaders by definition. The leader of the largest non-governing party in the House of Commons is the Leader of the Official Opposition, or simply the Leader of the Opposition, being entitled to a public salary in addition to their salary as a member of parliament (MP), and to several other public resources. There can be no more telling proof of

the conception of the political opposition as an alternative government in waiting. The particular nature of the Leader of the Opposition in the British House of Commons corresponds with his or her exposed status in the parliamentary procedure. Key elements of the parliamentary process at Westminster, such as the Prime Minister's Question Time, have long turned into an organized showdown between the prime minister and his or her direct adversary, the Leader of the Opposition (Serban, 2021).

Strictly speaking, even British Leaders of the Opposition are not the chair of their parliamentary party group, which is a separate and distinct position. In some party government regimes that have historically been inspired by the British model, the close integration of party and parliamentary leadership positions is not a defining feature of opposition leaders at all. Especially in multi-level systems with territorially complex party organizations, the offices of party leader and parliamentary party group leader are often held by two different individuals, and party leaders do not necessarily always hold a seat in the national parliament. In those regimes, the closest equivalent to a British Leader of the Opposition is the parliamentary party group leader of the largest party in parliament, rather than the party leader. Further, again, in contrast to the classic power-concentrating arrangements of Westminster systems, there has been a growing trend towards establishing “dual leaderships,” involving two co-leaders, both at the level of the party and parliamentary party leadership, and often also with an emphasis on ensuring gender parity at the top (see, e.g., Campus et al., 2022). Some countries, such as Germany, have even known a more advanced form of leadership dispersion with an occasional separation of party leader, parliamentary party group leader, and top contender for the post of head of government—referred to as “chancellor candidate” in the German context (Helms, 2020b)—performing distinctive functions and roles that are all concentrated in the hands of a classic British-style Leader of the Opposition. Both in political theory and constitutional practice, more dispersed notions of parliament-based opposition leaders can be imagined. As several contributions to this thematic issue suggest (de Vet & Devroe, 2023; Tripp, 2023), to some extent all MPs can be considered political leaders, with opposition MPs standing out as actors that share in the role of parliamentary opposition leader.

Even if the focus is on party-based forms of political opposition, which has, ever since Dahl (1966, p. 33), been widely considered to mark the single most important and effective form of political opposition in many regimes, it is to be acknowledged that there are numerous parties not enjoying parliamentary representation. To the extent that opposition parties are conceptualized as non-governing parties, those parties are genuine opposition parties that form part and parcel of the “opposition landscape.” Indeed, one of the key developments of recent decades concerns the significant increase not

just of different political and social movements, but also of opposition parties located and operating from beyond the parliamentary arena (Best, 2013).

That said, even the nature of some non-governing parties represented in parliament as genuine opposition parties have been occasionally challenged, both in political and scholarly terms. Some scholars hold reservations about parties that fail to be recognized by other parties as being equal members in the “alternation game” (i.e., possessing the perceived potential to govern and/or to form part of a coalition government). This corresponds with political dynamics in some countries where established democratic parties have sought to keep such “pariah parties” away from positions of status and power. However, at least at the level of scholarly research on opposition parties, the emerging mainstream is marked by notions of opposition parties in democratic contexts that include various types of “anti-system parties” (Zulianello, 2018). More than that, there is an apparent willingness to set aside established distinctions between opposition and resistance. In fact, as foreshadowed in the work by Brack and Weinblum (2011), opposition has increasingly emerged as the new “generic term” for different actors and activities challenging governments and power-holders by various means.

More important still, in the more recent literature the concept of political opposition is no longer being used for studying politics in democratic regimes only. Following powerful suggestions by Blondel (1997) and others, many scholars have come to agree that there can be manifestations of political opposition even in the absence of the principle of legitimate opposition, although this involves, in some cases at least, the danger of “conceptual stretching” (Helms, 2022). The reasons for extending the term “political opposition” to protesters and dissidents operating under autocratic rule apparently include the intention to acknowledge them as valuable and honorable political actors that often put their very lives on the line for the sake of freedom and democracy. That said, not all opposition parties in autocratic contexts are supporters of democracy, and there is a notable share of opposition parties that are eventually co-opted by the regime (Helms, 2022). More specifically, some of the most prominent political figures widely referred to as “women opposition leaders” in current media reporting relate to non-parliamentary political actors, including “independent candidates” and other civil society actors, from established autocratic regimes—such as Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Veronika Tsepkalo, and Maria Kolesnikova in Belarus. As Tsikhanouskaya’s case suggests, this initially little institutionalized role can even be combined with a status of being in political exile, and further strengthened abroad (Jalalzai & Jurek, 2023).

Yet, even in some of the most established democracies, opposition leaders are difficult to identify. This is true in particular for many presidential or separation-of-powers systems. Take, for example, the US: In the political science literature, presidents operating under

“divided government” have occasionally been conceptualized as “opposition leaders” (Crockett, 2000). Perhaps closer to political reality, most observers of US politics would agree that, during the Trump years, the closest equivalent to an opposition leader in parliamentary democracies was Nancy Pelosi, the leading Democrat in the House of Representatives. However, during the second half of the Trump administration (2019–2021), Pelosi was the majority leader, not the minority leader, in the House of Representatives (thanks to the turn to a divided government following the 2019 mid-term elections). Also, and very much in line with the established conventions of US politics, she did not become Trump’s key challenger in the 2020 presidential campaign. While political opposition in the US is indeed “ubiquitous,” as Nelson Polsby once famously suggested (Polsby, 1997, p. 511), there is, even in an era of advanced party polarization and cohesion, no institutionalized party-based political opposition performing the role of an “alternative administration” (in terms of people and policies), and no proper “opposition leader,” for that matter.

In this regard, the transnational political system of the European Union shares more with the US than with the parliamentary systems operated by most of its member states at home. Despite the successive de facto parliamentarization of the European Union, peculiarities remain, specifically but not only at the intersection of political oppositions in the member states and at the European level, which continues to be marked by a conspicuous lack of structural and functional integration (Helms, 2008; Mair, 2007). Specifically, there are no parliament-driven changes of personnel and power in the European Commission, and top political executives at the EU level are not normally recruited from amongst the parliamentary party group leaders in the European Parliament. Still, there are obviously chief representatives of the different party groups in the European Parliament that can be meaningfully referred to as parliamentary leaders, and some of them are indeed committed to challenging and opposing the Commission in a more than purely situational manner (Carlotti, 2020; Müller & Pansardi, 2023; Salvati, 2021).

3. Methodological Challenges and the Agenda of This Thematic Issue

As our observations above suggest, there is a wide variety of actors that can be reasonably referred to as opposition leaders. There is no need to press for a unitary definition applicable to different types of regimes. Indeed, there tend to be different kinds of opposition leaders, in particular parliament-based and extra-parliamentary ones, even within a given regime, and the relationship between party or parliamentary and political movement opposition leaders marks an item worth studying in its own right. This has increasingly come to be acknowledged even in a classic “parliamentary state” (Judge, 1993) as the UK (see, e.g., Bailey, 2014). Party

and movement relations, and distinct power-challenging alliances comprising different civilian collective actors, tend to be of even greater relevance in many developing countries (Bermeo & Yashar, 2016).

The methodological challenges of studying women opposition leaders are very similar to those identified for women executive leaders (Elgie, 2020). One major challenge relates to the small number of women opposition leaders, which largely precludes the use of statistical approaches, and frustrates many comparative research ambitions (see, however, Dingler & Helms, 2023). Other challenges correspond closely with what has been prominently referred to as the need to identify and uncover the hidden “double standards” haunting women leaders in other positions and areas. More than that, what Beckwith (2020, p. 134) has noted for many endeavors in feminist executive research is true also for the field of research on women opposition politicians and leaders: Indeed, some of the most provocative yet intriguing research questions “derive from sexist assertions,” namely that women political leaders “are not as ‘meritorious’ as their male counterparts.”

This thematic issue advocates a broad conceptualization of women opposition leaders, and women oppositional leadership for that matter, that can capture the many diverse real-world manifestations of this phenomenon in different types of political regimes. We are interested in (a) career pathways and trajectories, (b) patterns of selection and de-selection, as well as (c) the actual and perceived performance of women opposition leaders. Specifically, we were keen to gather a set of articles representing not just a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches but also different regions of the world, suitable to inspire future context-sensitive and comparative work. Nevertheless, as political research in this particular area is still very much in its infancy, this collection can only mark the outset of a long journey through largely uncharted territory.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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