

The Reluctant Feminist: Angela Merkel and the Modernization of Gender Politics in Germany

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The adoption of female suffrage across multiple western nations in the early 1900s was accompanied by the expectation that women's ability to vote would eventually lead to their direct involvement in governance. It was further assumed that by boosting more of their own kind into positions of power, female suffrage could and would make a significant difference in the laws and policies being adopted, thus allowing women to shape their own lives (cf. Cress in this volume). The last 100 years have unfortunately supplied much evidence to the contrary, leading countless scholars to investigate women's irregular paths to power, the institutional barriers they face, the stereotypical role expectations that hinder their progress, and new mechanisms seeking to equalize their participation in politics (in Germany: Davidson-Schmich 2016; Kolinsky 1991; Roll 2005; Scholz 2007; Clemens 2006).¹ These studies, in turn, have led us to theorize about different types of representation in an effort to explain when, where and how more women *in* politics might generate better, far-reaching policies *for* women.

Female suffrage may be a necessary condition, but it is clearly not a sufficient one in fostering gender equality. The 100th anniversary of women's right to vote in Germany (cf. Abels 2011) provides a unique opportunity to re-assess the metrics scholars use to determine whether the politicians female voters help to elect do, in fact, adopt policies enhancing the balanced participation of women and men in public life (Carless 1998; Geissel 2000). While many comparativists focus on the quantitative dimensions, known as descriptive representation (the number of women in powerful positions), few present direct evidence that female leadership has, or has not (Beckett 2006) induced qualitative reforms, labeled substantive representation. Finding empirical measures for the latter is a lot harder, insofar as many policies can take years simply to produce a level playing field, much less equitable societal outcomes. The ability to introduce gender-sensitive policies moreover depends on a wide array of structural factors, e.g. shifting party coalitions or economic crises, that cannot be held constant in real-world settings. Case studies often provide the best opportunity for establishing causal links between the presence of women *in* politics and adoption of better policies *for* women (von Wahl 2011; Wiliarty 2010; Yoder 2011). Based on a much longer study of Germany's first female Chancellor (Mushaben 2017) this brief essay analyzes the extent to which Angela Merkel has used her power to advance gender equality since 2005. In other words: Can one woman really make a difference? I argue that despite her Christian-Democratic affiliation, Merkel has indeed done more to foster equality than all previous German chancellors combined, although she refuses to label herself a feminist.

Of course, there is no way to prove that her sex alone accounts for major policy changes; curiously, no one ever raises this question in relation to male leaders, sug-

gesting a double standard even on the part of gender scholars. But if we are serious about recognizing intersectionality, we cannot deny that gender is a core variable in most decision-making contexts (Lombardo/Agustin 2011). Re-elected for the fourth time in 2017, Merkel has faced different coalition configurations, complicated by serious personality conflicts among her Cabinet members. Her many years in office nevertheless provide a solid foundation for observing not only changing laws but also medium-term policy outcomes. The fact that this Chancellor may have had “non-feminist” motives for introducing gender-sensitive policies does not detract from the real, everyday improvements engendered by these reforms.

I first explore key reasons hindering Merkel’s public identification with feminism, which critics erroneously use to downplay her contributions to gender equality. One needs to recall that Merkel spent the first 35 years of her life under an eastern gender regime that differed significantly from the postwar *Kinder-Küche-Kirche* paradigm shaping West Germany through 1989. Given the long-standing conflicts among different schools of western feminism (liberal, socialist, radical-autonomous, womanist) over the years (Mushaben 1989), she would probably be “damned if she did, damned if she didn’t” identify with one type over the other. I then outline legislative changes that can be ascribed to descriptive and substantive representation, respectively. I conclude with a few policies that I attribute to a third category of electoral impact, transformational representation.

Playing the Feminist Card at the Women20 Summit

Anticipating her role as president of the 2017 G-20 summit meeting, Angela Merkel tasked the Deutscher Frauenrat and the Verband Deutscher Unternehmerinnen in 2016 with organizing the Women20 (W20) Dialogue. Established under the Turkish presidency in 2015, the W20 became an official G20 “engagement group,” lobbying for the inclusion of female economic empowerment world-wide.² The purported high-point in 2017 was a Berlin panel discussion on April 25, titled “Inspiring Women: Scaling up Women’s Entrepreneurship.” Participants included German Chancellor Merkel, Dutch Queen Máxima, Canadian foreign minister Chrystia Freeland, IMF director Christine Lagarde, Bank of America CEO Anne Finucane, “first daughter” Ivanka Trump, Kenian high-tech entrepreneur Juliana Rotich und Nicola Leibinger-Kammüller, CEO of Trumpf GmbH. Wirtschaftswoche publisher Miriam Meckel moderated the discussion.

Towards the end of the session, moderator Meckel asked the participants whether they considered themselves feminists. Lagarde immediately raised her hand; Trump encouraged the audience to applaud but was jeered when she finally waved hers as well. Merkel’s hesitation led Meckel to ask her point-blank, “are *you* a feminist?” She replied hesitantly:

Ehrlich gesagt, ähm, möchte ich (...). Also, die Geschichte des Feminismus ist eine, bei der es gibt Gemeinsamkeiten mit mir, und (...) auch solche wo ich sagen würde, es gibt