Politics & Gender (2023), **19**: 3, 891–899
doi:10.1017/S1743923X22000228

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE INTRODUCTION

Gender and Political Representation in Times of Crisis

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(Received 01 September 2021; revised 08 May 2022; accepted 30 June 2022)

Abstract

Politics is increasingly dominated by crises, from pandemics to extreme weather events. These Critical Perspectives essays analyze crises' gendered implications by focusing on their consequences for women's descriptive and substantive representation. Covering multiple kinds of crises, including large-scale protests, climate shocks, and war and revolution, the contributions reveal three factors shaping both the theoretical conceptualization and empirical analysis of crisis and women's representation: (1) the type of crisis, (2) the actors influenced by the crisis, and (3) the aftermath of the crisis. Together, the contributors urge scholars to "think crisis, think gender" far beyond the supply of and demand for women leaders.

Politics seems increasingly dominated by crises, from large-scale citizen protests to extreme weather events. Starting in 2020, all countries grappled with a multiyear pandemic that had devastating public health consequences and far-reaching effects on the economy, security, and peoples' well-being. The COVID-19 outbreak occurred alongside many other crises, from rapidly developing to slowly evolving catastrophes, including climate shocks, political assassinations, regime changes, authoritarian reversions, and rebellions. Alone and in combination, crises have shaped when, how, and why citizens participate in politics and what they demand from their political leaders. The political consequences of crises make clear what gender and politics scholars have long known: crises and their aftermath have deeply gendered consequences for policy and political power.

These Critical Perspectives essays advance our knowledge of the gendered implications of crises by focusing on their consequences for women's political

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X22000228 Published online by Cambridge University Press

representation. Combining theoretical insights with evidence and examples from across the globe, the contributions collectively analyze how crisis interacts with—and transforms—the gendered patterns that shape women's access to leadership as well as the adoption and implementation of policies advancing women's rights. Together, these essays reveal three factors that shape the theoretical conceptualization and empirical analysis of crisis and representation: (1) the type of crisis, (2) the actors influenced by the crisis, and (3) the aftermath of the crisis. Together, the contributions urge scholars to "think crisis, think gender" far beyond the supply of and demand for women leaders.

Crises as Socially Constructed Events

As scholars of disaster have argued, the notion that "x constitutes a crisis" is hardly objective (Remes and Horowitz 2021). The plights of marginalized groups may fail to be categorized as crises by political actors, while the label may be readily applied to the travails of dominant group members. When crises do emerge, they can come from within, fueled by elite neglect, misbehavior, or criminality that unfolds until some tipping point where the situation "suddenly" becomes untenable and therefore must be resolved. Activists and politicians competing for attention on issues may also frame long-standing challenges as crises to gain traction.

Even shocks that come from outside the system—such as extreme weather events—sometimes only attain crisis status when privileged groups are affected. Suddenly launched into vulnerability, elites may experience (and thus frame) these events as crises, while marginalized groups who live at the intersection of oppression and precarity experience these same events as part of ongoing injustice (Luft 2016a; Strolovitch 2013). Moreover, the effects of crisis and response can, by design, exacerbate the burdens placed on marginalized groups while continuing to insulate the privileged (Mileti 1999). Crises are therefore constructions, varied in their harms, but shaped and installed in the public imagination through a meaning-making process that is itself influenced by power and ideology.

Our contributors recognize that crises are constructed, while also delineating the types of crisis they consider. Louise Davidson-Schmich, Farida Jalalzai, and Malliga Och focus on exogenous disruptions that pose a significant threat of harm to a country and require an urgent political response. By contrast, Corinna Kroeber and Sarah Dingler do not require an exogenous shock, but rather conceptualize crises as any situations in which the basic structures and fundamental norms of a system come under threat. For them, crises could be exogenous—such as the climate shocks identified by Rachel Brulé—or endogenous, such as the protests described by Catherine Reyes-Housholder, Julieta Suárez-Cao, and Carmen Le Foulon. Crises could also result from external and internal factors, like the rebellions and wars that Aili Tripp analyzes.

Focusing on Crises as Transformative Events

Taking these differences into account, we define a crisis as an external or internal event that disrupts the status quo, affects citizens' demands, and requires

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X22000228 Published online by Cambridge University Press

governments to respond while placing the careers of political actors or the survival of political institutions at stake. This approach acknowledges that meaning-making processes determine which external or internal events are perceived as disruptive and transformative—but that such constructed moments of crisis nonetheless have consequences for politics and policy.

Consider the 2014 capsizing of the Sewol passenger ferry off South Korea—and the death of 300 passengers—which contributed to the impeachment of Park Geun-hye, the country's first woman president. Or the 2009 scandal over the use of expense accounts by British members of Parliament (MPs), which generated widespread anger and led to MPs' removal from office and a referendum on introducing alternative voting. Governments' lax regulatory or ethical standards may have been long-standing in both cases, with marginalized groups consistently bearing the effects of negligent safety precautions and elite groups usually insulated from the consequences of their irresponsibility. Yet, framing these particular moments as a crisis altered the status quo: voters became restive, some politicians lost their jobs, and institutional redesign became possible.

Importantly, crises' disruption of the status quo is a fundamentally gendered phenomenon. To begin, crises often build upon existing axes of marginalization and worsen structural inequalities. Take the COVID-19 pandemic: the economic recession was in fact a "she-cession," during which lockdowns and school closures forced more women from the workforce because the sexual and gendered division of labor still assigns women primary responsibility for unpaid care work (Johnson 2022). Further, gender affects how governments respond. Activists across the globe have highlighted the pandemic's crisis of care, but governments' economic recovery plans largely left unpaid care work untouched (Grantham et al. 2021). The push to keep commerce afloat also disproportionately exposed women of color to contagion, given their overrepresentation in jobs that require contact with others (Johnson 2022).

The deepening of gendered and racialized inequities, and the failure of governments to treat such inequities seriously, confirm Luft's (2016b) notion of "racialized disaster patriarchy": gendered and racialized political, institutional, and cultural practices produce and perpetuate injustice during shock as well as during recovery. Policy makers often fail to see—or choose not to see—these consequences. Yet because crises have the potential to both disrupt and transform politics and practice, they can also alter gendered and racialized processes. Crisis can, for instance, make voters more open to feminized leadership styles (as some of our contributors suggest) or mobilize women to demand their rights (as other contributors demonstrate).

Crises and Women's Political Representation

These Critical Perspectives essays address how crises shape women's political representation both descriptively (in terms of women's access to power) and substantively (in terms of gendered policy change). Work centered on crisis and women's descriptive representation has drawn especially heavily on role congruity theory (Eagly and Karau 2002). Crises deepen the relationship between

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executive office and masculinity, as voters may expect leaders to respond swiftly and decisively during moments of upheaval or uncertainty. The perceived incongruity between women and stereotypically feminine roles and traits, on the one hand, and political leadership, on the other, suggests that voters may not perceive women as having "what it takes" to navigate the storm. Emergency politics, for example, reinforces the masculinized construction of the executive branch and leads to the exclusion of women politicians and women experts from crisis management teams (Piscopo 2021; Van Daalen et al. 2020). Voters may also judge women more harshly for perceived failures. For instance, more women MPs lost their seats relative to men MPs in the U.K. expenses scandal, even when their bad behavior was similar (Waylen and Southern 2021). Voters did not rally behind U.K. prime minister Theresa May following the 2017 terrorist bombing in Manchester—though they have supported men leaders during other terrorist attacks (Holman, Merolla, and Zechmeister 2022). Overall, scholars expect that crises can keep women from accessing or retaining political power.

At the same time, certain crises cast doubt on the advantages of men and masculinity. Crises may become linked to men's bad behavior. For instance, homosocial male networks become perceived as having facilitated corruption (e.g., the 2008–09 subprime mortgage scandal in the United States) or as having fueled armed conflicts and civil wars (such as the many postindependence conflicts that gripped the Global South in the decades following World War II). In these cases, role congruity theory suggests that crises can benefit women aspirants and politicians. If women are seen as more compassionate, honest, peaceful, or risk averse, postcrisis environments may create opportunities (Barnes and O'Brien 2018). Women can also be seen as outsiders who will bring a fresh approach. In combination with the removal of incumbent men, crises can serve as "critical junctures" that clear the way for new types of leaders (Beckwith 2015; Valdini 2019). Indeed, voters and parties prefer women candidates when distrust in current institutions is high (Funk, Hinojosa, and Piscopo 2021), and corruption scandals sometimes bring more women into office (Armstrong et al. 2022).

Crises can also mobilize women as activists while bolstering public enthusiasm for their social movement leadership. Consider, for example, narratives in the United States celebrating women of color as saviors of democracy (Perry 2020) and the broader phenomenon wherein women—who often bear the brunt of crisis-induced humanitarian harms—become radicalized into activism (Emejulu and Bassel 2015; Zulver 2022). Women's mobilization during a crisis can also generate legal, political, and cultural changes that advance women's rights, even as other patriarchal patterns remain intact or become reinforced (Berry 2018).

In summary, how gender affects women's representation during a crisis (and its aftermath) reflects how stereotypically masculine and feminine traits are mapped onto men and women leaders, and then onto the types of crises that men and women are perceived as competent to handle. These connections persist in the public imagination, even as feminists work to unravel dichotomous and essentialist conceptions of gender. Our contributions sit at this intersection, documenting how gender stereotypes map onto crisis while identifying whether, when, and how crises have transformative potential.

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New Insights on Crises, Gender, and Political Representation

This Critical Perspectives section pushes the scholarship on gender, crisis, and political representation forward in important ways. Three central themes emerge across the contributions. First, role (in)congruity remains an important theoretical lens for understanding how the type of crisis interacts with support for masculine and feminine leadership styles. Second, crises affect political relationships beyond the voter-leader link, and women political actors have agency in navigating crises. Third, the aftermath of a crisis has important implications for women's access to and retention of power as well as for women's legal status and political rights.

Crisis Type

The essay authors focus on different types of crises. Davidson-Schmich, Jalazai, and Och, alongside Kroeber and Dingler, take broad views, while Brulé concentrates on climate shocks, Reyes-Housholder, Suárez-Cao, and Le Foulon on protest-driven crises, and Tripp on wars and revolutions. Even as crises vary, patterns appear that shape women's representation in predictable ways.

Davidson-Schmich, Jalazai, and Och argue that role congruity theory explains men and women leaders' success or failure during crisis. They argue that different crises necessitate different policy responses and different communication styles—and that expectations about the best response and style are gendered. For instance, men leaders benefit when the necessary policy response is clear and the communication style required is assertive, but women leaders benefit when the required response is ambiguous and the required communication style empathetic. Former Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff had little room to maneuver during an economic downturn, given the inherently masculinized nature of the economy. By contrast, New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern had room to frame how the COVID-19 pandemic would be understood. In making the pandemic about public health, Ardern could match her feminized leadership style to citizens' desire for care and concern.

Kroeber and Dingler similarly distinguish among crisis types, separating "act fast – give slack" crises from "transform together – build trust" crises. The former call for rapid decision-making by executives and limited legislative oversight, while the latter require fundamental changes to the political system. Acting fast and giving slack reaffirms the masculine nature of executive branch posts, while transforming together and building trust can positively influence views about women in politics. Together, these two contributions indicate that scholars can no longer "think crisis, think male." Instead, researchers must account for whether crises are viewed as needing masculinized or feminized responses—and how savvy leaders might themselves take advantage of role congruency and gender stereotypes to control their image and ultimately their ability to access and retain power.

Reyes-Housholder, Suárez-Cao, and Le Foulon push this point further, emphasizing how gendered outcomes are not predetermined but are actively contested. Theorizing from the recent system-wide protests in Chile during 2019–20, they

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note that the protests generated concern for law and order alongside support for protesters' justice-oriented demands and empathy for protesters harmed by police violence. Those wishing to restore order wanted rapid-fire decision-making, amplifying calls for authoritarian (and masculine) leadership, whereas those agreeing with the protesters' grievances voted for a constitutional convention with gender parity. The latter outcome reflects role congruity theory, in that women's political representation became associated with social justice. At the same time, Chilean voters seeking change also elected a young and openly feminist man as president. Reyes-Housholder, Suárez-Cao, and Le Foulon thus show that gains in women's political representation depend on the triumph of the feminized interpretation of the crisis, but also that the emerging demand for new leadership benefits not just women, but also men from outside the traditional ruling class. In other words, crises can simultaneously transform and reinforce the links between gender stereotypes, role congruity, and leadership styles.

Actors and Agency

Just as crisis type varies, so do the actors affected by the crisis. Davidson-Schmich, Jalazai, and Och; Kroeber and Dingler; and Reyes-Housholder, Suárez-Cao, and Le Foulon focus on gendered expectations of leaders, whether among voters (Davidson-Schmich et al. and Reyes-Housholder et al.) or elites (Kroeber and Dingler). Tripp analyzes how war and revolution provide women with opportunities. In participating as combatants, activists, and/or peacemakers, women use conflict and its aftermath to expand their roles and win new rights and protections. Brulé turns to actors within the family, theorizing that climate shocks disrupt the patriarchal roles traditionally assigned to men and women, with long-term, positive consequences for women's mobilization and representation. These latter two contributions go beyond role congruity, considering how crises reinforce or undermine public and private gendered power structures.

These Critical Perspectives essays also reinforce that crises' outcomes vary depending on the agency and ability of women actors. Focusing on role congruity too easily interprets women's successes and failures as stemming from stakeholders' essentialized or uncritical demands for masculinized or feminized leadership. Yet women political actors also engage in meaning-making around crisis, using this process to advance their own objectives. At the elite level, Davidson-Schmich, Jalazai, and Och highlight that Ardern's success in managing the COVID-19 pandemic depended not just on voters' essentialized expectations about feminine compassion, but on Ardern's own political skills. The pieces on climate, protests, and war all emphasize that crisis allows women to organize and therefore to develop a gendered or feminist consciousness (Brulé on climate) and to articulate and to assert their own demands (Reyes-Housholder et al. on protests and Tripp on war). For example, Tripp argues that the expansion of women's political rights following war and revolution happens because women fought for their place at the decision-making table. Together, the contributions highlight how crises can provide actors with opportunities to reconfigure existing structures of political power. They can loosen men's dominance of

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public and political life, leading to new forms of women's mobilization and new laws and policies that advance women's rights.

Crisis Aftermath

Finally, while postcrisis environments may transform women's political representation, our contributors highlight that such outcomes are not guaranteed. Crisis resolution can leave preexisting power configurations unchanged or even reinforced. Take Reyes-Housholder, Suárez-Cao, and Le Foulon's analysis of the Chilean protests: had demands for law and order triumphed over demands for institutional and social change, men—and authoritarian styles of leadership—may have remained the norm. Chile avoided this fate, but other countries have not. The Arab Spring mobilized pro-democracy activists, including many women and feminists, but in Egypt, the aftermath bolstered militarized and masculinized forms of power and limited women's chances to transform both public and private gender relations (Moghadam 2018). Building on this point, Tripp argues that not all political conflicts create deep enough ruptures within the political elite to allow women and other previously marginalized groups to assert themselves. If crises leave existing power structures in place, they may likewise benefit individual woman politicians or movement leaders without transforming the structures of oppression that marginalize nonelite or grassroots women.

Moving the Field Forward

These Critical Perspectives essays underscore the importance of crisis type, actors, and aftermath. They also chart a new research agenda on gender and political representation in times of crisis. First, many contributors draw on role (in)congruity to explain women's access to, and tenure in, leadership posts. Role congruity theory emerged because, historically, women's exclusion from political leadership meant that political office, masculinity, and masculine traits became intertwined. Though men are still markedly overrepresented in elected and appointed office, women's recent gains call into question just how much the association between leadership and maleness remains true. Crises especially challenge this relationship, and our contributions highlight key questions for future research: When can women leaders succeed with role (in)congruous leadership styles? When, why, and how do particular leadership styles cease being mapped onto masculinity and femininity, and instead become traits for which voters equally reward (or punish) men and women?

Second, the contributors all show that crises change gendered political opportunity structures. Certain crisis types—including climate shocks, pandemics, and the aftermath of armed conflict—may result in women's leadership being rewarded or even demanded. What remains unclear is whether and to what extent these effects persist. On the one hand, crises may successfully disrupt gendered power relations, as Brulé's analysis of climate shocks in South Asia suggests. On the other hand, crises may yield only temporary gains before reversion to and reinforcement of the male-dominated status quo, as Tripp finds

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X22000228 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in some instances of war and revolution. Conflict may empower individual woman combatants and activists and generate some gains in women's political rights—but these changes may fall far short of transforming gendered power structures in state and society. Crises can even set women's rights back. Take COVID-19, for example. Where women disproportionately exited the workforce and took on more domestic labor, survey respondents expressed *less* egalitarian gender attitudes post-pandemic than pre-pandemic (Reichelt, Makovi, and Sargysan 2021). Future research should tackle how crises alter public and private gendered power relations, in both the short and long term.

Finally, our contributors are generally optimistic that crises will ultimately facilitate women's representation. However, that (some) women leaders, activists, or citizens gain more opportunities, power, or rights during crisis should not obscure that crises bring tragedy and loss. Moreover, during the kinds of crises where our contributors sound notes of caution—such as those that generate demand for law and order—democratic decay and authoritarian reversion are real possibilities. Across the globe, democratic backsliding is associated with the loss of legal, political, and social rights for women and other minoritized groups. Scholars should attend carefully to how crises—from climate change events to pandemics—are being leveraged by antidemocratic forces to reinscribe hierarchies of marginality and inequality that shut women out of power and limit efforts to secure equity and justice more broadly.

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Cite this article: O'Brien, Diana Z., and Jennifer M. Piscopo. 2023. "Gender and Political Representation in Times of Crisis." *Politics & Gender* **19**, 891–899. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X22000228

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