

Can the Symbolic Power of A Female President Empower Female Legislators?

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In 2012, Joyce Banda became Malawi's first female president and Africa's second female head of government. Banda was not elected to the office of president. As vice president, she assumed this role after her predecessor, Bingu Mutharika died. When women are elected to office could be attributed to the inside political and social factors that shape the perceptions of female leadership. In this case, Banda came to power through an outside event making Malawi a unique case to study female empowerment. In the *American Political Science Review*, Michael Wahman, Nikolaos Frantzeskakis, and Tevfik Murat Yildirim investigate how the symbolic power of a female president might affect the behavior of female parliamentarians. Their research finds that women under a female president become empowered and less confined which leads them to assert leadership roles and increase frequency in speechmaking. In other words, female heads of governments change parliamentary behavior for women representatives. Empowered women can empower women.

This study examines how symbolic power can promote real power or thick representation for women at the legislative level. Wahman, Frantzeskakis, and Yildirim's theory is that female presidents serve to normalize female political power and introduce momentum for increased thick female representation. This study looks at the case of Malawi and the country's first female president, Joyce Banda and her effect on women's parliamentary behavior. Malawi was the



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In the **APSA Public Scholarship Program**, graduate students in political science produce summaries of new research in the *American Political Science Review*. This piece, written by Nicole Wells, covers the article "From Thin to Thick Representation: How a Female President Shapes Female Parliamentary Behavior" by Michael Wahman, Nikolaos Frantzeskakis, and Tevfik Murat Yildirim. The full article is available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305542100006X>

perfect case study because the authors could study the exact same set of parliamentarians before and after Banda came to power. It also meant that because the social and political context of Malawi had not changed, the authors had the opportunity to study the effects on Parliament when a female president is introduced.

Data shows that out of 193 countries there are only 21 female heads of government. Fourteen countries that have a cabinet where women make up at least 50%. Only four nations have national legislators in which half are women. While these numbers show an underrepresentation of women in politics, the absence of female leadership has long been the experience for many girls and women around the world. This lack of female representation has prompted research on the role of women in politics. Scholarship in political defines the difference between thick and thin representation. Thin representation is just the mere presence of women in parliament. Thick representation means women are granted a real voice and power in the legislature.

Wahman, Frantzeskakis, and Yildirim measure thick representation by the number of speeches women made in Parliament. They found that women made significantly more speeches after the inauguration of President Banda than under the previous male president. Of the 51,981 speeches that were made between 2009 and 2014, 84.3% were made by men. Under the previous male president, female legislators spoke about 60% as often as male legislators. After Banda became president, women spoke 85% as often as men. Overall, women's speeches increased by 2.2 per month. In Malawi, the economy is seen as a male subject and is not a topic women often speak about. However, female speeches on the economy increased from .52 to .89 speeches under a female president.

These findings provide critical insight into the role of symbolic female leadership and the empowerment of female legislators. Wahman, Frantzeskakis, and Yildirim's study give us an interesting look at the dispersion of power among marginalized groups. Their research shows the positive impact female symbolic power has on normalizing female political power. It also shows the need for more women in executive, national, and local levels of government. ■