

Where are the Women MPs?

Paper presented at the ASPG Conference

3-5th October 2012

Darwin

Dr Mary Crawford

School of Management, QUT Business School | Queensland University of Technology |



Australia's first business school
with triple international accreditation



Where are the Women MPs?

Abstract

Whilst women's representation in Australian parliaments has increased over the last two decades, it has struggled to maintain those numbers of women MPs. In fact, despite the recent landslide electoral wins in a number of states, women's representation there has decreased. Researchers have increasingly turned to electoral institutions as determinants of female representation (Darcy, Welch and Clark, 1994). In the Australian context it has been suggested that proportional representation as practised in Upper Houses maybe one way to expand women's involvement in the parliamentary system (McAllister and Studlar 2002).

This however, does not explain the disparities between the parties in terms of their record in getting women elected or the powerful cultural forces which continue to make politics an increasingly unattractive career for many women.

This paper takes up the challenge of exploring the structure of electoral institutions when seeking an explanation as to why Australian women continue to be underrepresented in Australian parliaments (Maitland 1995) and whether changes to political structures can bring gender equity to Australia's parliaments.

Key words: women, politics, gender, representation, proportional electoral systems.

Introduction

While the Northern Territory reassesses the issue of statehood and possible changes to the constitution, it presents an opportunity to consider political representation and whether the current system offers an opportunity for all to participate in the political process.

One of the key discussion points for Australian and international scholars has been to explore the reasons for Australian women taking 40 years to enter the national parliament after winning the right to vote and stand for parliament. This numerical under-representation of women in national parliaments has been well documented. Early work by Sawer and Simms (1984) provides an historical context of women's political activism as an attempt to explain the constraints on women's entry into Australian public life. The social conditionings of women, the lack of involvement in politics by middle class women, and difficulties for women in travelling the vast distances required

by entry in to the federal parliament are all cited as reasons for Australian women's lack of entry into the national parliament despite the political promise offered by the struggle for suffrage.

Other researchers have identified deterrents to women's entry into the Australian political system as the role of the major political parties (Simms 1993, Broughton and Zetlin 1996, Hill 2003), the poor public image of politics and politicians (Phillips 2000), the way the media portrays women politicians (Van Acker 2003), the demands on women politicians to behave in particular ways (Sawer and Zappela 2001, Maddison et al 2006) and the parliamentary system itself (Castles F. 2002, Tremblay 2003).

In more recent times scholars have suggested that since it is electoral systems that help define the rules of the political game, the way that they impact on women's representation in Australia's parliaments is worthy of exploration. Such systems have an important influence on various societal groups, including women, as to who is nominated for, and elected to the national parliament. This growing literature suggests that more women are elected in proportional electoral systems (Paxton & Hughes 2007).

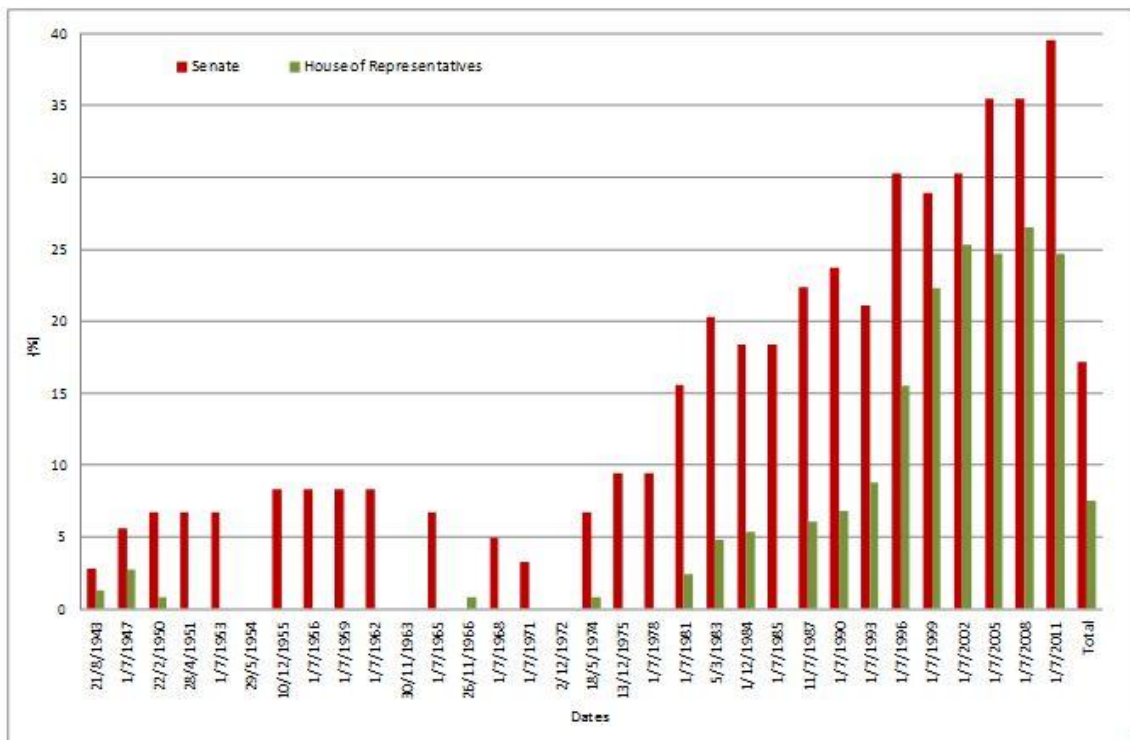
This paper looks specifically at women's representation in Australian legislatures and seeks to evaluate whether different electoral systems really do enable more women to be full participants in the political and parliamentary structures or whether it is a number of other key factors which continue to be integral to electoral outcomes. They are firstly, the role of the political parties and their pre-selection processes, secondly the contextual and socioeconomic factors, such as education of the population as a whole, levels of women's education and employment; and thirdly the district magnitude, that is the number of representatives per district as defined by the electoral system (Vengroff, Creevey, Krisch 2000, 197).

The Australian Senate.

Work done by Pamela Paxton (1997) who surveyed 108 countries, found that proportional representative systems led to women having a 3.5% advantage in terms of representation over other electoral systems. Other researchers argue that up to twice as many women can be elected through proportional representation as by single member systems (Darcy, Welch and Clark, 1994). Vengroff et al 2000 also found that proportional systems are more friendly to women and increase the likelihood of their being elected. Indeed, Paxton and Hughes (2007) went so far as to suggest that there was a general acceptance that women do better in gaining political office under systems of proportional representation.

In the Australian context, it is the Senate which is elected by proportional representation, while the House of Representative uses preferential voting for a single member electorate. The Senate consists of 76 senators, twelve from each of the six states and two from each of the mainland territories. Each state of the Australian federation, regardless of its population, has an equal number of senators. Twelve senators represent each state, and the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory are represented by two senators each.

Figure 1: Percentage of women in the Senate and House of Representatives, 1943 to 2011
(Commonwealth Parliamentary Library)



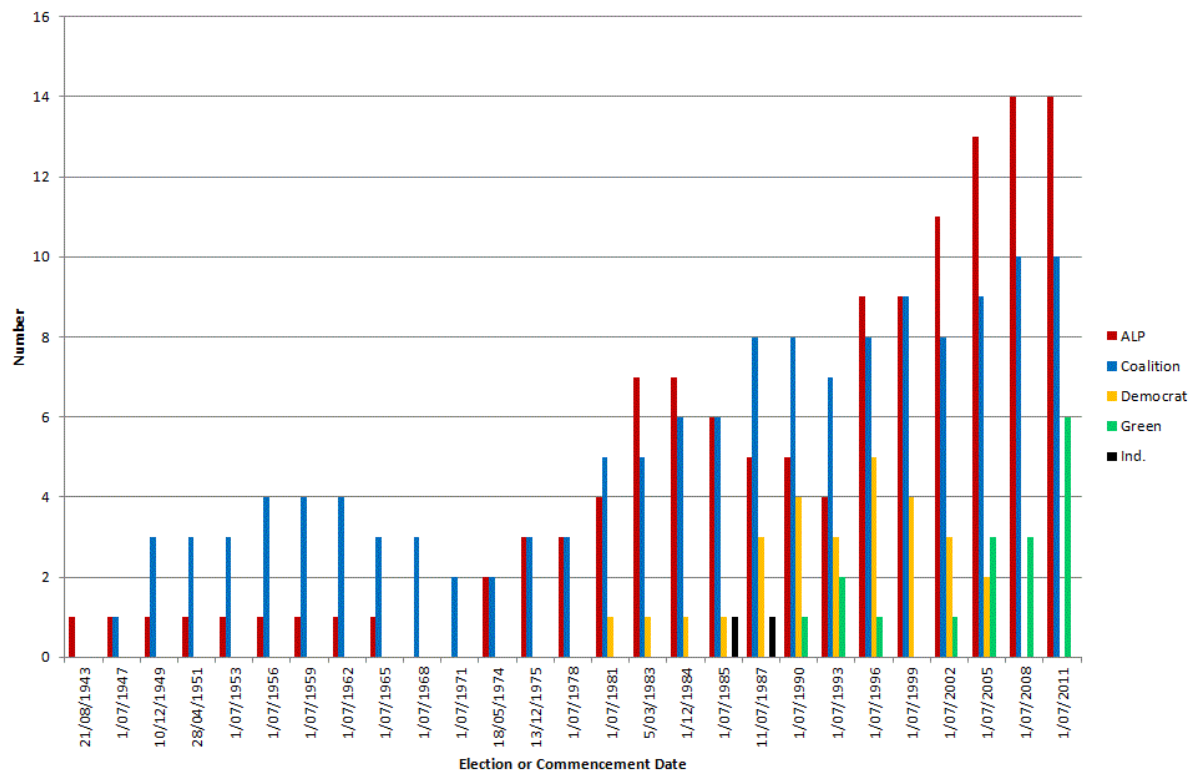
Women’s representation in the Senate has continued to be higher numerically than that for women in the lower house. This has been maintained since women entered the Senate in 1941. However, numbers in the Senate itself, were not constant and it took 20 years until 1975 for women to reach the level of representation of 1955. This issue of being unable to embed female representation in political life suggests that the idea that once women’s representation reached a certain number (critical mass) it could be sustained, does not appear to be valid. This has not proven to be the case

in any of the Legislatures in Australia and similar results have occurred in the UK and Europe (Eason 2009, Fox 2011). However, despite fluctuations in the level of women's Senate representation women continue to win Senate seats. Through the 1950's to the 1970's this was not the case in the lower house with the rare exception of Kay Brownbill elected for one term in 1966 and Joan Child in 1974. It was not until the 1980's that women started to be elected in some numbers to the House of Representatives. Hence it could be argued that the electoral system favoured by the Senate does increase women's participation over that of the House of Representatives. It has also ensured that women have participated in the Senate since the first woman was elected in 1943.

However, Senate representation by women varies from state to state. If the proportional representation system increases the likelihood of women being elected it is difficult to understand the wide variations in the numbers from different states. One could conclude that other factors are at play and that contextual factors within the states may be more important than the electoral system itself.

The ACT and Northern Territory each send a man and a woman to the Senate, while Tasmania has 7 of its 12 Senators who are women. NSW and SA have 5 female Senators, Queensland 4, and Victoria and Western Australia both send 3 women to the Senate. Despite proportional representation there are marked differences in women's representation on a state basis. Women's political success in the Senate would seem to be tied to political party processes and/or other factors which impinge on electoral success. Indeed all 6 of the Tasmanian ALP Senators are women and the Greens have 6 women Senators, including their leader Christine Milne from a total representation of 9 Senators.

Figure 2: Number of women in the Senate by party, 1943 to 2011 (Commonwealth Parliamentary Library)



State Legislatures

Within the state legislatures which also use a proportional representation electoral system there are wide variations in women’s representation. However, Queensland and the Territories which do not have Upper Houses or a proportional system of voting have been able to have high numbers of women in their parliaments at various times. A further anomaly is thrown up by the Tasmanian system which has single member electorates in the upper house where female representation is high and proportional representation in the lower house where women make up only 24% of members. This would suggest that it is not simply an electoral system that will bring gender equity to political representation in Australia. (See Figure 3)

Western Australia

While women make up only 18% (11/59) of members in the lower house in Western Australia, they form 47% (17/ 36) of members in the upper house. For the upper house there are 6 members

elected for 6 regions- 3 are metropolitan (North, South, East) and 3 are regional (Agriculture, Mining and Pastoral, and the South West) . There are 11 female representatives for the Metropolitan regions and the East Metropolitan has all 6 women representatives. In the non metropolitan regions there are 6 women representatives out of the total of 18. Given that the magnitude of each of these regions is the same, the results are quite different and would suggest that rural communities that are the base for the more traditional industries of farming, mining and agriculture are less likely to endorse and support women representatives than their metropolitan counterparts.

However, what cannot be disputed is that the proportional representation system of the upper house delivers more women representatives than the single member electorates of the lower house.

New South Wales

While the difference in representation for women in the 2 houses in New South Wales is less than Western Australia's, it does demonstrate that the Single Transferable Vote as a form of proportional representation can and does deliver 10% more women to the upper house than the single member electorates of the lower house.

In New South Wales there are 20 members in the 93 seat Legislative Assembly making them 21% of representatives. However, in the Legislative Council there are 13 women in the 42 seat Council giving them a 31% representation. This may also be assisted by the single ticket giving a larger electoral magnitude which has been found to assist with supporting women's representational attempts (Paxton & Hughes 2007, 139). It may also help in ameliorating the effect of the metropolitan/regional differences that can impact on the election of women candidates.

It is also worth noting that all the men and women elected to the New South Wales Legislative Council belong to political parties and have had to be part of the preselection process. This means that many of these women have been able to get on the party's ticket without displacing a male. Such systems also offer the opportunity for parties to run candidates with a range of different skills to appeal to specific sectors of voters (Maitland 2002). Such lists offer parties a chance to show a united and varied front, which is sometimes not the case in the preselection battles for a single member electorate.

South Australia

While South Australia has a similar electoral system to that of New South Wales the results for the upper house are not so advantageous for women. The lower house has 47 members elected in single member constituencies and the 14 women represent 29% of those elected. In the upper house

which is elected by the Single Transferable Vote system of proportional representation the 7 women members in the 22 seat chamber represent 31%. While this is slightly higher than the lower house it does not demonstrate the gains as suggested by the fieldwork (Maitland 2002, Paxton & Hughes 2007).

While there are 3 independents in the lower house all those elected to the South Australian upper house belong to political parties. This may well suggest that it is party magnitude that may assist in the election of more women provided they are on the party lists (Paxton & Hughes 2007). This can impact directly on who is elected as it is the party who determines how far down the list a candidate may be and then who is most likely to be elected.

Australian Capital Territory

Women's political representation is highest in the Australian Capital Territory at 41%. There are 7 women in a 17 seat Assembly elected by the Single Transferable Vote system of proportional representation using the Hare Clark system.

There are 3 constituencies – Brindabella and Ginninderra which elect 5 members each and Molonglo which elects 7 members to the Assembly. Despite having a larger district magnitude Molonglo elected only 2 women members as part of their 7 representatives, while Ginninderra elected 3 women and Brindabella elected 2 females. All those elected to the Assembly were members of political parties. This party magnitude would seem to be embedded as the first Chief Minister to be elected in 1989 was Rosemary Follett from the ALP, the second female Chief Minister was Kate Carnell from the Liberal Party in 1995 and now Katy Gallagher from the ALP is the Chief Minister being elected to the position in 2011.

These results certainly endorse the position that proportional representation advances women's parliamentary representation. However, it is worth noting that some of the negative cultural issues surrounding the election of women and the political process may not be as marked in Canberra where many people are involved in government practices and processes every day.

Tasmania

The election results in Tasmania offer a very different perspective on what type of electoral system best delivers for women's representation. Women's representation in Tasmania's upper house is 40% almost double the 24% of women in the lower house. However, it is the lower house where there is proportional representation (Hare Clark system) with 5 electorates which are the same as

the federal seats electing 5 members each. One electorate Braddon has elected no women, Lyons and Bass one woman each and Denison and Franklin have 2 female members. Indeed the Premier of Tasmania, Lara Giddings, is a female.

By contrast the upper house elects 15 members from single member electorates. Currently 11 of the 15 members are independent, and 5 of them are women.

Here it would seem that the electoral system has delivered a result which is the direct reverse of what the research findings as outlined earlier suggest. In effect it is the single member electorates which have given greater representation to women rather than the proportional representation system of the lower house.

Victoria

Victorian electoral results further complicate the issue as to whether a proportional representation system actually advantages women. In the lower house where there are 88 single member electorates there are 29 women or 33% of members. However in the upper house there is no advantage for women's representation and in fact they make up only 32% of members – that is 13 of 40 members. This is a proportional preferential system and 5 members are elected from each of the 8 regions, 5 metropolitan and 3 regional. The 5 metropolitan regions elected a total of 8 women while the 3 regions elected 5 women. However, Eastern Victoria Region elected no women and Northern Victoria region elected 4 women of their 5 representatives. Such figures suggest there is no marked difference in metropolitan or regional voting patterns in relation to electing women to the upper house. It also demonstrates that equitable parliamentary representation needs more than a particular electoral system. Despite the different electoral systems there would appear to be no discernible difference in the level of women's access and participation in the Victorian legislative chambers.

Queensland

Queensland's parliament offers a fascinating study. It has only one house and was the first legislature in Australia to elect a female Premier in her own right, Anna Bligh. It also boasted not only a woman Premier but also 50% representation by women on the floor of parliament. However, despite the landslide win by the LNP lead by Premier Newman on the 24th March 2012 this representation has slipped to 20%. For the LNP government, women make up only 16% of members - a mere 13 women compared to 63 men. Ironically the ALP Opposition is lead by a

woman and of the 7 members, 5 are women. This also parallels Queensland's female Senate representation where the LNP has 1 female Senator from 4 (25%), the ALP has 2 women from 5 (40%) and the Greens' sole Queensland Senator is a female, Larissa Walters (100%).

This raises a number of issues in relation to some strongly held beliefs – that new governments offer opportunity for an expansion in the representation of women, and that once women are in the parliament, their numbers can be maintained. Neither has proven to be the case in relation to Queensland. This leads to what many see as the key underlying factor in women's political representation – that of the preselection processes of the major political parties.

Northern Territory

Currently there are 8 women in the 25 member unicameral Legislative Assembly representing 32% of members. Elections for this house are for single member electorates. However, this figure represents more women than some of the other houses which are elected by proportional representation.

When Clare Martin became the first female Chief Minister in 2001 for the Northern Territory there were 10 women in the Legislative Assembly and this number has changed with each election. This would suggest that political party processes need to be paid more attention if women's representation is to be established and maintained at the highest levels. Given the landslide win of Terry Mills and the CLP on 25th August 2012 past research would suggest a new government would have more women. However, this has not been the case and, as in Queensland, more analysis is needed to advance the cause of gender equity in political representation.

Conclusion

The effect of the proportional electoral systems on the legislatures of the states and territories of Australia in terms of advancing women's participation in political life has had some mixed and varied effects and thus makes it very difficult to reach any conclusions.

However, in Western Australia women's representation is high in the Legislative Council which uses such a system but the results in Tasmania contradict this and give a very different result. In Tasmania it is the single member electorates where there is higher representation of women and where candidates seek to remain independent. For New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria the results are inconclusive in terms of the advantages of the proportional representative system over the single member electoral system. In contrast, Queensland achieved its highest representation for women under a single member system but this has not been sustained.

Women's representation in the state legislatures is largely on political party lines (with the exception of the Tasmanian Legislative Council) and it is worth noting that there is a higher % of representatives for the ALP than for the Liberal Party. Where there are Greens members, there is

also a high % of representatives who are women. This suggests that “party does matter” (Reingold & Harrell 2010) and plays a significant role in women’s political engagement. Other researchers (Vengroff et al 2000) also suggest that representation is dependent on the interaction of party ideology and the electoral system. It is particularly dependant on the recruitment and endorsement processes of political parties.

Miki Caul (1999) in a study of political parties in 12 advanced industrial societies found that it was usually parties of the New Left who were most likely to select women candidates for office because of their goals of reform and greater equality in society. However she also went on to find that women need to be active in these parties if they are to draw women to them and change the institutional processes from within. This is what brought about the ALP’s adoption of the Affirmative Action quota in 1994 and the chance to continue to raise the level of women’s representation in Australia’s parliaments (Hussein 2011).

Such measures by political parties can also help overcome negative ideology which is one of the most cited reasons for low female participation in politics (Paxton & Kunovich 2003). This is seen as creating substantial barriers to women’s entry into politics and makes assumptions about the roles of women and men and continues to emphasise that “politics is men’s business.” It is perhaps such underlying cultural issues that need to change for women to reach equal parliamentary representation.

Political party processes and negative cultural factors will remain as barriers to women’s parliamentary representation irrespective of the electoral systems that are embraced. Within the State legislatures of Australia the electoral systems continue to intersect with such features and hence do not bring uniform results in women’s political representation.

Gender equity in parliamentary representation in Australia will require more than a change to the electoral system.

Appendix 1

Figure 3.

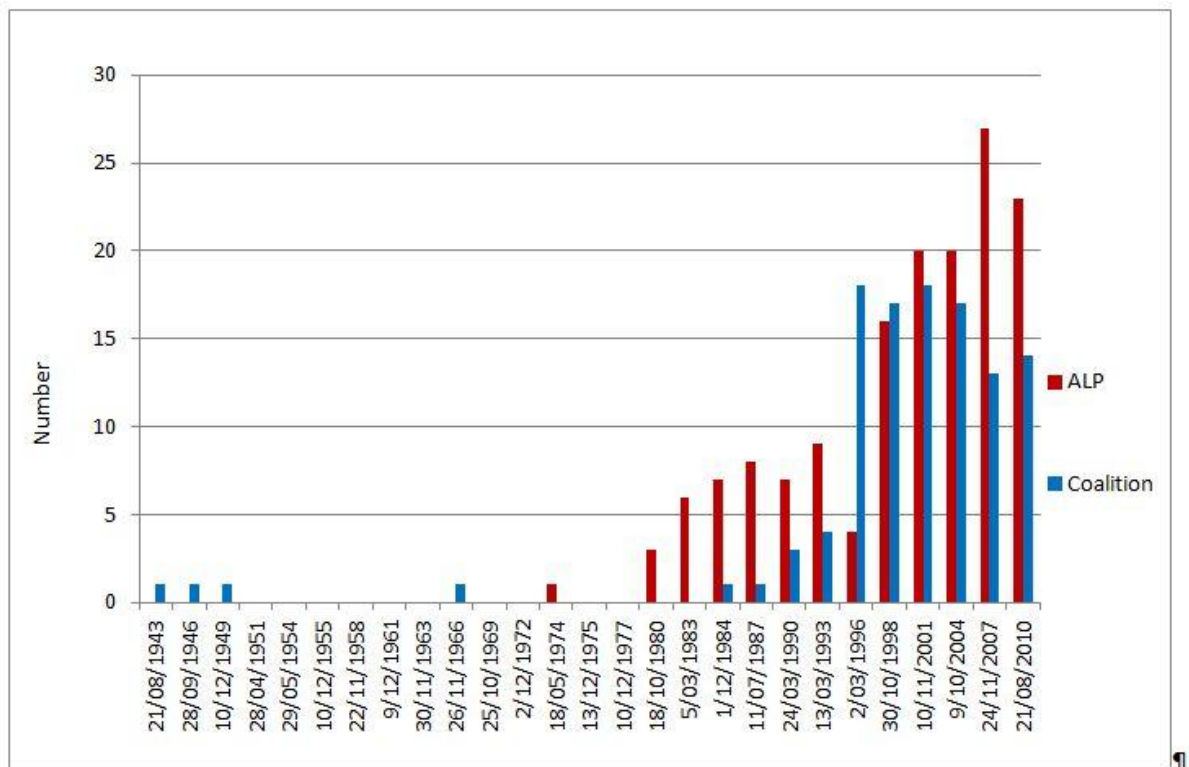
Politics and Public Administration Group
Parliamentary Library

Composition of Australian Parliaments by Party and Gender, as at 5 September 2012
(includes any by-election results and any casual vacancies filled since the most recent general election, as shown, in each jurisdiction)

	Cwth (21.8.10)			NSW (26.03.11)			Vic (27.11.10)			Qld (24.3.12)			WA (6.9.08)			SA (20.3.10)			Tas (20.3.10)			ACT (18.10.08)			NT (25.8.12)			Total		
	M	F	%F	M	F	%F	M	F	%F	M	F	%F	M	F	%F	M	F	%F	M	F	%F	M	F	%F	M	F	%F			
Lower House																														
ALP	48	23	32.4	12	8	40.0	24	19	44.2	3	4	57.1	20	6	23.1	15	11	42.3	7	3	30.0	4	3	42.9	5	3	37.5	138	80	36.7
LP	46	13	22.0	42	9	17.0	26	9	25.7				22	2	8.3	15	3	16.7	8	2	20.0	5	1	10.7				164	39	18.2
NATS	12		0.0	16	2	11.1	9	1	10.0				4		0.0													41	3	6.8
LNP										65	13	16.7																65	13	16.7
CLP		1	100.0																					11	5	31.3	11	6	35.3	
GRN	1		0.0	1		0.0													4	1	20.0	1	3	75.0				7	4	36.4
KAP	1		0.0						2	0	0.0																3		0.0	
IND	5		0.0	2	1	33.3				1	1	50.0	2	3	60.0	3		0.0						1		0.0	14	5	26.3	
Total	113	37	24.7	73	20	21.5	59	29	33.0	71	18	20.2	48	11	18.6	33	14	29.8	19	6	24.0	10	7	41.2	17	8	32.0	443	150	25.3
Upper House																														
ALP	16	15	48.4	9	5	35.7	11	5	31.3				4	7	63.0	6	2	25.0	3		0.0						49	34	41.0	
LP	22	6	21.4	9	3	25.0	12	6	33.3				11	5	31.3	5	2	28.6		1	100.0							59	23	28.0
NATS	3	2	40.0	4	3	42.9	3		0.0				3	2	40.0													13	7	35.0
CLP	1		0.0																									1		0.0
GRN	3	6	66.7	3	2	40.0	1	2	66.7				1	3	75.0	1	1	50.0									9	14	60.9	
FFP																2		0.0										2		0.0
CDP				2		0.0																						2		0.0
DLP	1		0.0																									1		0.0
S&F				2		0.0																						2		0.0
INP	1		0.0												1	1	50.0											2	1	33.3
d4d																1		100.0										1		100.0
IND																			6	5	45.5							6	5	45.5
Total	47	29	38.2	29	13	31.0	27	13	32.5				19	17	47.2	15	7	31.8	9	6	40.0						146	85	36.8	

Appendix 2

Figure 4 : Number of women in the House of Representatives by party, 1943 to 2011
(Commonwealth Parliamentary Library)



References

- Broughton, S., & Zetlin, D. (1996). Queensland ALP women parliamentarians: Women in suits and boys in factions. *International Review of Women and Leadership*, 21(1), 47-61.
- Castles, F. (2002). 'Australia's Institutions and Australia's Welfare' in G.Brennan & F.Castles (Eds) *Australia Reshaped – 200 years of Institutional Reformation*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Caul, Miki (1999). 'Women's Representation in Parliament. The Role of Political Parties.' *Party Politics*, 5, 1: 79-98.
- Darcy, R., Welch, S. and Clark, J. (1994). *Women, Elections and Representation*. New York. Longman.
- Easson, C. (2009). 'Why is women's representation in the House of Lords increasing at only 'a snail's pace'? Paper Presented at PSA Annual Conference 2009. 7th – 9th April 2009, Manchester, UK.
- Fox, R. (2011). "'Boom or Bust" in Women's Representation: lessons to be Learnt from a Decade of Devolution' *Parliamentary Affairs* Vol 64, 1: 191-203
- Hill, L. (2003). 'The Political Gender Gap: Australia, Britain and the United States' *Politics & Society* 22, 69-96.
- Hussein, H. (2011). 'Why Changing the Rules matters – Lessons from the ALP's Affirmative Action quota.' *The Drum Opinion*. Accessed on 4/9/2012 on www.abc.net.au/unleashed
- McAllister, I. and Studlar, D. (2002). 'Electoral Systems and Women's Representation: A Long-Term Perspective.' *Representation* 39(1): 3-14.
- Maddison, S. (2006). 'Outsiders among Outsiders: Young Women in New South Wales Politics.' In D.Brennan & L.Chappell (Eds.) *Women in NSW Politics*, UNSW Press, Sydney.
- Maitland, R. E. (1995). 'How the election system structure has helped women close the representation gap' in Karvonen, L. and Selle, P. Eds. *Women in Nordic Politics. Closing the Gap*. Brookfield, VI. Ashgate . 281-309.
- Paxton, Pamela (1997), "Women in National Legislatures: A Cross-National Analysis", *Social Science Research*, 26, 4: 442-464.
- Paxton, P. & Hughes, M. (2007). *Women, Politics and Power. A Global Perspective*. Pine Forge Press, Thousand Oaks, California.
- Paxton, Pamela, and Sheri Kunovich (2003), 'Women's Political Representation: The Importance of Ideology,' *Social Forces*, 82, 1: 87-114.
- Phillips, H. (2000). 'Women in the Western Australian Parliament 1921-1999: Towards a new parliamentary politics?' *International Review of Women and Leadership*, 6,1: 24-37.

- Reingold, B.& Harrell, J. (2010). 'The impact of descriptive representation on women's political engagement.' *Political Research Quarterly* 63,2: 280-294.
- Sawer, M., & Simms, M. (1984). *A Woman's Place: Women and Politics in Australia*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- Sawer, M. & Zappala, G. (2001). *Speaking for the People* Melbourne University Press. Melbourne.
- Simms, M. (1993). 'Two steps forward, one step back: Women and the Australian party system'. In J. Lovenduski & P. Norris (Eds), *Gender and Party Politics*. 16-34. London: Sage.
- Tremblay, M. (2003). 'Women's representational role in Australia and Canada: The impact of the political context'. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 38(2), 215-238.
- Van Acker, E. (2003). 'Media representations of women politicians in Australia and New Zealand: High expectations, hostility or stardom'. *Policy, Organisation and Society*, 22,1: 116-136.
- Vengroff, R., Creevey, L., Krisch, H. (2000). 'Electoral System Effects on Gender Representation: the Case of Mixed Systems.' *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 1: 197-227.