

# Gender Matters in Politics

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GEORGINA WAYLEN

ALTHOUGH often ignored by both practitioners and academics alike, gender matters in both politics as a practice and politics as a subject of study. As Karen Beckwith has claimed:

[Gender is] conventionally understood as sets of socially constructed meanings of masculinities and femininities . . . these meanings emerge from stereotypes about male and female behavior; from characteristics and behaviors conventionally associated with women and men; from normative assumptions about appropriate behaviors of men and women; from assumptions about biological difference; and from social structures of power and difference.<sup>1</sup>

The importance of gender in politics can easily be demonstrated anecdotally through a few contemporary examples. If we look at some of the key issues that divide American politics today—whether it is reproductive rights most controversially in the form of abortion, or same-sex marriage—we can see that many of the ‘culture wars’ are fought over the hugely gendered issues of sexuality and bodily autonomy. Or to take another case, as we have seen recently in France as well as in other parts of Europe, the veil (and a number of other debates around multiculturalism) is another arena where women’s bodies and the attendant claims to emancipate women are also a symbolic battleground. Finally, in a somewhat different vein, the recent rhetoric in the United Kingdom that ‘we are all in it together’ obscures the very differentiated impact of the current spending cuts and austerity programmes. It is clear that some groups are affected far more adversely than others, and many women who make up a large proportion of public

sector workers and the majority of lone parents and poor pensioners have been particularly hard hit and affected in different ways to men.

This article aims to demonstrate more systematically how both the practice and study of politics are gendered in significant ways, but also how both have changed over last thirty years. It will then highlight some of the challenges that remain, and end by outlining some of the key themes that should be part of any ongoing agenda to improve our understanding of the important ways in which politics is gendered.

Fundamental to this endeavour is the realisation that we cannot look at the practice and the discipline of politics as separate from one another. The challenges facing both politics as a practice and politics as an academic discipline with regard to gender issues are intertwined. This has always been the case and particularly so after the advent of second wave feminism in late 1960s/early 1970s. The development of much of the academic work on gender and politics was fundamentally informed by second wave feminism and its aftermath. For the majority of gender scholars, the ‘personal is political’—their academic interests are intertwined and inseparable from their political commitment. Their endeavour is therefore one of ‘critical scholarship’, similar to other scholars within a progressive tradition and encapsulated by Robert Cox when he famously argued that scholarship is ‘always *for* someone and *for* some purpose’.<sup>2</sup> This does not mean a critical scholarship that is not rigorous and methodologically robust, even if it does not adhere to a

model of social science that is 'scientific' or correspond to an idealised conception of science.

The starting point of many gender and politics scholars echoes Theda Skocpol's sentiment that the aim of research is to look at real world problems and puzzles; in this case, to understand gender inequality and how to tackle it.<sup>3</sup> As such, the methods chosen to undertake this endeavour need to fit the problem that is being explored. These can be quantitative or qualitative or, as is increasingly common, a mixture of both quantitative and qualitative methods. So most gender and politics scholars are pluralists and believe that rational choice bargaining models have their place, as does regression analysis, even if they do not personally use them, as there is no template of how to do research with predetermined models or methods.

## Politics as a discipline and a practice

Our starting point is the big changes both in politics as practice and politics as discipline over last thirty years. We now see more women as prominent politicians, heads of state and of international bodies in Europe, Africa and Latin America, ranging from Angela Merkel in Germany to Dilma Rousseff, an ex-guerrilla and recently elected president of Brazil, and Christine Lagarde at the International Monetary Fund. The parity cabinet (2004/08) of Zapatero's socialist government in Spain contained equal numbers of male and female ministers and outraged the defence establishment with the appointment of a heavily pregnant woman as defence minister. There have also been some very distinguished and influential women political scientists (in 2009, the political scientist Elinor Ostrom became the first woman to win the Nobel Prize for economics). And academia as a whole has recently made

some concerted efforts to create more of a level playing field with regard to women. It would be impossible to deny that there have been significant efforts and achievements, both in terms of increasing women's political representation and improving the opportunities for women scholars in academia in general.

However, both are still male-dominated even today. In the United Kingdom in 2011 there are 504 male, but only 144 women, MPs in Westminster (women currently make up only 22 per cent of the House of Commons). This is, however, the highest figure ever as the Conservatives doubled their number of women MPs to 49 (16 per cent of their total) and 31 per cent of Labour MPs are women after 2010 election (even if the number of female Liberal Democrat MPs declined from nine to seven). The last election also saw a large increase in the numbers of black and minority ethnic (BME) MPs. There are now 27 BME MPs (or 4.6 per cent of the total) of which nine are women (who comprise 33 per cent of all BME MPs and are made up of two Conservative and seven Labour MPs), so both main parties have a relatively larger proportion of female BME MPs than they do women MPs in general. However, the United Kingdom is still joint 51<sup>st</sup> in global league table of women's representation and the current coalition cabinet contains relatively few women ministers.

While important, it is not just a question of 'sheer numbers'—namely increasing the numbers of women in either sphere—that is not enough in itself. More profound changes are needed to both politics as a practice and politics as a discipline to make them more gender equitable. To facilitate this, it is important to understand what is it about politics as an academic discipline and politics as a practice and the ways in which the two interact that result in this over-representation of men.

If we first think about the nature of politics as a discipline, we can see that

traditionally it has been based on very narrow definitions of what counts as politics. These core assumptions have their roots in the work of political theorists like Locke, who based many of their ideas on the analytical separation of the public and the private spheres—namely that citizens/heads of household (for which read ‘men’) were the ones who were active in the public sphere. This subsumed women (and also children) into the household/family within a private sphere where ‘every man’s home is his castle’ and in which he can do as he pleases, free from the interference of the state.<sup>4</sup>

The notion of a separation of the public and private spheres has had a lasting impact on the real world. Women’s roles and the assumptions made about their roles in the private sphere still impact on their roles in the public sphere. This does not play out in the same way for men. Very different assumptions are still made, for example, about men’s caring responsibilities and what might be an appropriate job and working patterns. It continues to affect notions of what counts as politics and the political, which is still predominantly ‘high politics’ in the public sphere; who is seen as a suitable person to be involved in politics; and what are appropriate issues—often narrowly defined—that exclude certain activities and actors and embody particular notions of masculinity and femininity.

These ideas have again affected what has been deemed suitable subject matter for the discipline of politics. They have sometimes impacted too on methods that are used, privileging models that are based on assumptions about the individual as a supposedly ‘rational’ actor using a restrictive definition of ‘rationality’ and a notion of the individual more reminiscent of economics. And even although this individualist rational actor model has been increasingly criticised—not just by feminist scholars, but also by many economists—it remains pervasive.

We are still living with the legacy of all these factors—the artificial separation of the public and private, the privileging of ‘high politics’ and the adoption of certain models of the individual—that has made politics as a discipline somewhat different to sociology and anthropology and the other social sciences which find it easier to incorporate the private sphere and, as such, have also found it easier to take gender on board and include women in their disciplines.

If we turn to politics as practice, we see that these underlying assumptions are also reflected in the ways in which politics is practised. This has been the case whether it is the Tory party candidate selection committees that in the past were unashamed at looking askance at women aspiring to be candidates, accusing them of neglecting their homes and husbands (as revealed in Lovenduski and Norris’ ground-breaking study in the mid-1990s).<sup>5</sup> Or that, for years, domestic violence was thought of as something with which the police should not interfere as it lay outside state jurisdiction in the realm of the private sphere. As recently as the 1960s it was commonplace for incidents to be considered ‘only a domestic’ and therefore not worthy of police action.

Those notions were profoundly shaken by second wave feminism with its slogan the ‘personal is political’. Second wave feminism challenged the definitions of what activities and issues are legitimately seen as political. Of course, the women’s movement, as it was known then, was part of the social movements, such as the civil rights and anti-war movements, that were challenging the status quo in 1960s and early 1970s, but it is also important to remember that the emergence of the women’s movement itself was in part a reaction to the sexism within those other movements. The net result was to begin a rethink of our understanding of politics, what it means and how to do it.

## Understanding gender and politics

To return to politics as discipline, we can see that much of the early gender and politics scholarship reflected these pressing real world issues and concerns and, as such, developed two major strands of research. The first aimed to show the importance of women's activism outside of the conventional political arena, thereby helping to redefine and broaden what counts as 'political'. The second strand focused on putting women back into analyses of conventional politics. Gender research highlighted different aspects of women's activism and women's movements defined in the broadest sense. One important avenue has shown the impact of the diverse activities and ideas that are often thought of as feminist. It demonstrated how feminist movements put important issues onto the political agenda. For example, it looked at the women's peace movement, epitomised by the Greenham Common Women in the mid-1980s, and also at the campaigns around abortion and reproductive choice, domestic violence and pornography. Second, gender research highlighted the successful policy outcomes that resulted from feminist campaigns to get reform, such as the criminalisation of rape in marriage. Finally, it examined the often autonomous organisations that provided important services such as women's refuges and rape crisis centres.

However, researchers did not just focus on what we might think of as 'middle-class' feminists and activists. They also looked other groups of organised women who would not necessarily be associated with feminism, such as the Asian women strikers at Grunwick in West London in the late 1970s, and as we have recently seen portrayed in the film *Made in Dagenham*, women in the 1968 Fords machinists strike. The women machinists went on strike to get their work sewing car seat

covers re-graded from the 'unskilled' 'B' category (where they received only 85 per cent of the male 'B' rate) in which it had been placed by Ford management (and condoned by the trade unions).

The activities of the diverse women's movements organising in other contexts apart from these First World ones have also been highlighted, examining, for example, women's organising in transitions to democracy. Although initially ignored by many democratisation scholars, a range of women's movements played an important part in the breakdown of some non-democratic regimes, often bringing about the 'end of fear' as some of the first protesters on the streets. Perhaps the best known are human rights protesters such as the Madres of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, who, at great personal risk, demonstrated publicly to demand the return of their missing children (and in some cases, grandchildren) who had been 'disappeared' by the repressive military regime. These movements also included feminist organisations. Feminists in Chile, for example, held one of the first demonstrations against the Pinochet regime to celebrate International Women's Day in 1983 and campaigned using the slogan 'democracy in the home and in the country'.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to their important role in the broader opposition movements against dictatorship, organised women also tried to ensure that the outcomes of some transitions would bring positive change, such as increased political representation for women and the provision of greater rights in the post-transition period. In both the Chilean and South African transitions, women, organised as women, attempted to influence the developing political processes, but with varying results. More recently we have seen similar efforts in Tunisia and Egypt. Egyptian women organised after only one woman was appointed to the transitional government and a clause was inserted into the draft constitution that

appeared to preclude women from becoming president.

If we turn to the second strand of gender research, we see that initially gender scholars also focused on putting women back into the study of conventional politics. They challenged the widely held stereotypes about women's political activity and behaviour in the conventional political arena. Scholars looked at women's political behaviour and the differences between theirs' and that of men without either unthinkingly assuming that the two were the same or seeing women as somehow a deviant version of the male norm. So, for example, classic early gender work on voting behaviour demonstrated that when education, age and background are controlled for, men and women vote at same rates, thereby disproving earlier beliefs that the women's rate was lower than the men's.

However, women and men do often exhibit differences in their political attitudes and behaviour, but not necessarily in the ways that had been assumed (for example, for a long time it had been thought that women were inherently more right wing than men). Men and women do tend to line up on issues in different ways, but not necessarily on a straight forward left–right split (such as on law and order). Recent opinion polls in the United Kingdom, for example, showed that while 52 per cent of men initially supported bombing of Libya, only 35 per cent of women did.<sup>7</sup> Women also exhibit higher levels of support for welfare spending and are more worried than men about impact of cuts, particularly in education and health. At the last British general election, maybe unsurprisingly, men were more likely to vote Conservative than women, who were more likely to vote Liberal Democrat or Labour. In the 25–34 age group this 'gender gap' was extremely stark. The Conservatives had an 18 per cent lead among 25–34 year-old men, while in contrast

Labour had an 11 per cent lead among women in the same age group.<sup>8</sup>

Not unexpectedly perhaps, a lot of emphasis has also been put by gender scholars on looking at women's representation—particularly in legislatures. They have focused on analysing and explaining the differing levels of women's representation, including so-called 'descriptive representation' and the strategies that can be introduced to increase the number of women in legislatures, and particularly on measures such as electoral quotas. Attention has subsequently turned to look more at 'substantive representation' and the question of how far women MPs can (or even should) represent 'women's interests' however these are defined (which is always a thorny and controversial issue for gender scholars); and at the level of women MPs needed (the 'critical mass') to achieve this substantive representation of women. More recently, in part reflecting real world changes, there has been more interest in women in the executive, such as the New Labour women ministers in the core executive in the United Kingdom.<sup>9</sup>

As a consequence of the efforts of activists and academics, we now know a lot about women's movements and the impact of women activists in a wide array of political arenas—for example, in bringing about changes in norms, such as the recognition of women's rights as human rights and anti-domestic violence measures, on a global level. We have also seen the introduction of a raft of equality measures. Equality legislation, gender mainstreaming and women's policy agencies (WPAs) have been established in most of the world and endorsed by international and regional bodies like the European Union and the United Nations. Electoral quotas, too, are now widespread globally (adopted in roughly half the world's parliaments) and although controversial, it is clear that if they are well designed, actually implemented and

enforced (unlike in France and Brazil), they are one of the most effective ways to 'fast track' increases in women's representation.

## The remaining challenges

There is still much that remains to be done both to politics as a practice and the study of politics. First, there has been increased contestation around issues associated with gender equality in politics as practice. As far back as the early 1990s an 'unholy alliance' emerged at the Cairo population conference when President Bush, the Vatican and the Islamic lobby united to fight against moves to improve women's reproductive rights. In addition to the very differentiated impact of current austerity measures by gender (as well as by race, class and disability), the current British coalition government has abolished the Women's National Commission as part of its 'bonfire of the quangos'; made big cuts to the single equality body, the Equality and Human Rights Commission; and ignored the gender equality duty introduced by the previous Labour government in its 2010 emergency budget (later condoned by courts). In 2011 it began consulting about abolishing the Equality Act altogether as part of its drive to cut 'red tape'. These changes are all happening in the context of an increasingly sexualised culture in which issues of violence, rape, street harassment and pornography have increased and taken on new forms. Yet the seeming decline in feminism that had been much vaunted until recently appears to be reversing with evidence of a resurgence of interest, particularly among younger women, with the emergence of new forms of activism, blogs, demonstrations and actions taking advantage of technologies such as social media. The 'slutwalks' that took place all over the world in the summer of 2011 following remarks made by a senior

policeman to Canadian law students are further evidence of this.

Much also remains to be done to improve politics as a discipline. Although gender is now accepted as part of the discipline of politics, the gender and politics scholarship still runs largely parallel to and ignored by the majority of scholars. The best that usually happens is that there is one gender lecture or chapter in a book separate from the 'real business' of the discipline that remains unchanged. However, there are also a number of important challenges facing gender scholarship itself. The efficacy of its analyses could be improved if it broadened its focus in several ways. First, as many have argued, too little attention was given initially to issues of intersectionality. Much of the pioneering gender scholarship was primarily focused on the issues and concerns of white, middle-class women. Scholars were then forced to pay more attention to race, class, sexuality and disability by vocal black, working-class, lesbian and postcolonial feminists. Men's and women's voting behaviour, for example, can only be understood if you also look at a range of factors that include race, class and age, and not just gender. Analyses now are, on the whole, better than they were, but there is still some way to go.

Second, and again this is not a new insight, more attention needs to be given to men and masculinity, although this lack is understandable given the early focus on 'putting women back in'. Men and masculinity should now be problematised more.

Third, gender scholarship has sometimes been too narrowly focused on gender equality policies and bodies. This is not to deny the excellent work that has been done on WPAs and equality measures, but this has sometimes been at the expense of examining how wider policies and institutions are gendered and the implications of this. Perhaps not surprisingly, this focus has also not been of

much interest to the wider discipline or encouraged more attention to be given to the gender and politics scholarship, which if we want gender scholarship to play a bigger role within the discipline as a whole, is surely important.

Finally, there has been a tendency to be overly focused on actors. No one would deny that actors, and certain actors in particular, are hugely important in both the conventional or nonconventional political arenas, but sometimes the research has been overly concerned with counting the numbers of women ('descriptive representation') first in legislatures, and now in some of the recent work on women in executives. Or it has occasionally been marred by a certain degree of wish fulfilment/celebration. Feminist scholars understandably have been looking for significance in the actions of women activists or legislators, underpinned by a belief that they either are/or should be doing things in 'women's interests', and this has sometimes driven the underlying research questions and research focus.

We therefore need more sophisticated analyses to satisfactorily explain some of the important real world puzzles in which we are interested—in particular, why is it that certain outcomes are not as they were hoped for or expected? Why, for example, have some women's movements not had the successes they were anticipating in terms of policy results after successful mobilisations? Or why have WPAs/state feminism also not been able to effect the transformations that had been hoped for by those who set up the machineries, despite all their efforts? Or, indeed, why has the introduction of quotas and increases in women's representation not been as transformative as had been hoped for by some of their supporters? And why it is that the outcomes of some transitions to democracy have been more positive in gender terms than others? Why was there was initial disillusionment in Chile when it appeared that women's movements,

despite their high levels of mobilisation and attempts to influence the transition, had not achieved many of their goals?

## The way forward

I end with some suggestions about the way forward to deal with some of these challenges. We need a more sophisticated understanding of actors, and to move more fully away from a preoccupation with 'sheer numbers' This has already been happening with the increasing discussion of 'critical actors', who are of course men as well as women, in a range of locations. To go back to the case of the Ford machinists mentioned earlier, we need also to explore the key role played by Barbara Castle as Secretary of State for Employment both in resolving that dispute and in creating the resulting Equal Pay Act that was passed in 1970. How influential was her role in ensuring that change occurred? We also need better analyses of structures and institutions and their interaction with actors or, at the very least, how structures shape actors' goals and strategies. I am advocating a return to the old conundrum of structure and agency and their inter-relationship.

We also need better analyses of institutions. In common with much of social science, there has been an institutional turn in gender and politics. Feminist Institutionalists are developing a wider understanding of institutions as gendered structures and an improved understanding of how they operate in gendered ways. Underlying this development is a belief that if we understand institutions as rules, norms and practices, then we need to know how both formal and informal rules, norms and practices are gendered. In particular, one of the key questions for all institutionalists, as well as feminist ones, is how to explain institutional change. How and why does change occur (or not occur)? Linked to that, how is it that institutions can remain the same?

We need to explain institutional continuity—or, more accurately, institutional reproduction. How do institutions actually sustain and reproduce themselves? This can help us to understand why attempts to change institutions do not have the desired results or why the creation of new institutions does not always fulfil the hopes of their designers.

If we take the example of one relatively new institution—the Scottish Parliament—it is clear that after a lot of input from women activists, the institutional designers made conscious efforts to make it more gender friendly with a less adversarial style both in its design and procedures, more family friendly working hours and conditions, as well as an electoral system that might lead to the election of more women than in Westminster. This initially did result in relatively high levels of women's representation, but according to Fiona Mackay what we have seen is a 'nested newness'.<sup>10</sup> The institution was not created with a blank slate. Westminster still formed the default position for Scottish parliamentary practice and process. For example, First Minister's Questions, modelled on Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs), were introduced later on to promote a sense of theatricality that was felt to be lacking. And despite the new formal rules, old practices such as Labour party candidate selection procedures slipped back in, contributing to a reduction in the number of women MSPs. We need to understand more fully how and why this could happen.

Feminist institutionalists are trying to investigate different forms of institutional change using approaches derived from some of the latest work by new institutionalist and, in particular, historical institutionalist research.<sup>11</sup> Whether it is of the rapid exogenous kind witnessed when new institutions displace old ones, as we have seen, for example, in some post conflict settlements, or of a more gradual endogenous kind, when actors use or convert existing institutions for new pur-

poses, research like this is often difficult to do. It needs approaches with which political scientists are often unfamiliar (and often rather sceptical about) in order to unravel how longstanding pre-existing informal institutions may undermine formal rule changes. We also need to investigate the roles played by the sometimes seemingly irrelevant rituals and practices; and many of these rules, norms and practices are often hard to discern because they are so taken for granted as to render them almost invisible.

Overall it is vitally important that we improve our understanding of how both politics as a practice and politics as a discipline are gendered; and to do this we need to improve our analyses of actors, institutions and the interaction between them. This will help us to change both the practice and the discipline of politics for the better.

## Notes

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- 3 T. Skocpol, 'Doubly engaged social science', in J. Mahoney and D. Rueschemeyer, eds, *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 407–28.
- 4 C. Pateman, 'Feminist critiques of the public/private dichotomy', in S. Bann and G. Gaus, eds, *The Public and Private in Social Life*, London, Croom Helm, 1983, pp. 281–303.
- 5 P. Norris and J. Lovenduski, *Political Recruitment: Gender, Race and Class in British Parliament*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- 6 G. Waylen, 'Women and democratization: conceptualizing gender relations in transition politics', *World Politics*, vol. 46, no. 3, 1994, pp. 573–88.

- 7 Com Res Poll, 25–27 March 2011.
- 8 IPSOS MORI General Election Outcome, 2010.
- 9 C. Annesley and F. Gains, 'The core executive: gender, power and change', *Political Studies*, vol. 58, no. 5, 2010, pp. 909–29.
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- 11 M. L. Krook and F. Mackay, eds, *Gender, Politics and Institutions: Towards a Feminist Institutionalism*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.