

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

The Changing Subfield of Comparative Politics and the Journal of Politics & Gender

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Much has changed since 2007–2010 when I co-edited the journal *Politics & Gender* (P&G) with Kathleen Dolan. In this essay, I reflect on the changes in the journal and the subfield of a comparative politics of gender. Dolan and I were the second team to edit the journal, following in the footsteps of the inaugural editors Karen Beckwith and Lisa Baldez. The journal was finding its footing at the time, and increasing submissions was a key concern. This year, on its 20th anniversary, we can celebrate that the journal, like the subfield of gender and politics, has flourished and matured. The number of articles published by the journal has multiplied exponentially and the quality of articles has improved significantly. Moreover, the journal has demonstrably helped shape the subfield of a comparative politics of gender in ways that I outline below.

From the 1970s up until the 1990s, much of the research on women and politics was focused on American politics. It focused on political behavior, voting patterns of men and women, and women as political elites. Survey research treated sex as a variable (“Moving to a Comparative Politics of Gender?” 2006). The founding of the American Political Science Association’s Women and Politics Research Section in 1986 was a watershed moment. Another such moment came in 2005 with the launching of the journal P&G to reflect the increasing shift to framing the study of women in terms of gender.

The journal’s past two decades have coincided with several broader trends, which the journal also influenced. First, gender analysis became more institutional in focus. Gender as a topic also became more analogous to — and intersectional with — other systems of inequality rather than a property of persons or individual characteristics. Political scientists moved beyond studying women to examining how political institutions were gendered, how resources were unevenly distributed, and how gender influenced political behavior.

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Studies increasingly infused by notions of intersectionality — a concept inspired by Kimberlé Crenshaw — demonstrated that gender could not be understood in isolation from other axes of power and oppression (Avanza 2020; Bell and Borelli 2024; Pepin-Neff and Winter 2020; Rodó-Zárate 2020, Snipes and Mudde 2020). Finally, research in gender and politics increasingly adopted quantitative methodologies (Stauffer and O'Brien 2019; Tripp and Hughes 2018).

Second, and importantly, the study of the “comparative politics of gender” developed in scope and clarity with the shift from women to gender as a key focus. I recall participating in a conference in 2007 organized by Karen Beckwith at Case Western Reserve University entitled, *Toward a Comparative Politics of Gender: Advancing the Discipline along Interdisciplinary Boundaries*, which wrestled with the future directions of the study of comparative politics of gender as this subfield was still struggling for recognition (Beckwith 2010). Two years later, in 2009, Pamela Paxton at the Ohio State University organized another symposium entitled *Women in Politics: Global Perspectives*. These and other such interventions helped define the subfield and the place of gender in the study of comparative politics.

The study of comparative gender politics gave birth to new areas of research and new ways of thinking. Since 2010, the number of submissions and publications in *P&G*, including comparative politics articles, has increased exponentially and expanded to reflect changes in the wider field. When I was an editor of the journal, the comparative submissions were almost exclusively about Europe and Latin America, with about 11% from Africa, and none on Asia nor the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). There were also many cross-national articles. In comparing *P&G* publications from 2005–2009 with 2019–2023, there are also notable variations in regional focus. The proportion of published articles on Europe has increased by 15%, while the percentage of articles on Latin America has decreased by the same proportion. The percentage of published articles on Africa, which were minimal when I was editing the journal, have been reduced by half to 6%, while articles on Asia and the MENA region now constitute 13% and 8% of the total articles, respectively. Although the percentage of articles employing cross-national analysis has decreased by 6%, I suspect that these types of studies of gender politics have increased but have landed in comparative politics and general interest political science journals, which are especially receptive to such methodologies. Comparative public policy studies are also increasing, and policy journals are competing for them.

Expanded Themes

The study of comparative politics of gender has contributed significantly to research on politics and gender by enriching the scope of its questions, data, and approaches. It has introduced new topics that were not salient in the earlier American-focused study of women and politics. For example, the study of violence against women still features prominently in the literature on women's movements and policy. But recognition of violence against women politicians has been increasingly identified as a key factor that undermines women's

presence in politics (Krook 2020). The literature on Latin America has been especially important in highlighting this global phenomenon (Bjarnegård, Håkansson, and Zetterberg 2022; Restrepo Sanín 2022).

The literature on gender quotas has expanded dramatically. In Europe, but especially outside of Europe, the focus on institutional impacts on elections is now on more than just the effects of proportional representation and party and district magnitude. In its early phase, quota research largely offered country studies, mostly describing how quotas operated, and what difference they made to increasing women's representation. They discussed the quality of candidates who came into legislatures through a gender quota (Murray 2010), normative questions raised by quotas (Krook 2006a), how they were changing societal attitudes towards women (Kittilson 2005), the international diffusion of quotas, and how they influenced domestic debates (Krook 2006b).

More recent studies have examined the effectiveness and broader societal implications of quotas, the design and implementation of quotas, backlash to quotas, public attitudes towards quota women, the challenges and limitations of gender quotas, the intersection of gender quotas with other forms of representation, and the dangers of essentialism implicit in the adoption of quotas. There have been continuing debates over the effectiveness of gender quotas and whether they actually empower women, the need to better understand the long-term effects of quotas, the impact of quotas on gender equality, and their role in different political and social contexts. Strangely, there has been little attention given to the binary nature of quotas, even as understandings of gender have undergone radical transformations and are being increasingly conceptualized on a continuum.

The study of gender in postconflict contexts has been another area of interest that has emerged in recent years (Berry and Lake 2017). Increasing attention is being paid to the gendered impacts of election violence (Bjarnegård, Håkansson, and Zetterberg 2022), the role of women's networks and movements in peacebuilding and gender equality policy (Gizelis 2021; Niner and Loney 2020), and the expansion of women's political citizenship after major war (Tripp 2023a).

The newer literature has also addressed issues of broader public interest. Jennifer Piscopo (2020) and Aldrich and Lotito (2020), for example, have argued that claims of women leaders' superior handling of the pandemic, while offered in good faith, are misleading. Piscopo provides evidence to show that the narrative connecting women leaders to their strong performance during the COVID-19 crisis overlooked the fact that women were more likely to be leading wealthy and high state capacity countries that were most likely to mount effective pandemic responses.

Comparative gender politics scholars have helped to rethink key concepts in feminist political science, such as critical mass, an idea developed by Rosabeth Moss Kanter that international organizations latched onto, setting targets of 30% representation of women in all political institutions. The notion of "critical mass" in politics was premised on the idea that women would not have major impact in legislative or other political arenas until they numerically made up a significant minority. Childs and Krook (2006) helped shift the discussion on critical mass by calling on scholars to reformulate the central question away

from descriptive representation to one that focuses on the conditions under which women make a difference and to how substantive representation functions. They thus redirected the discussion to what women do as critical actors, even in small numbers.

Comparativists working on international, national, and local governance have made important contributions to research on formal and informal institutions (Kenny and Mackay 2009; Mackay and Waylen 2009). They have looked at governance problems in the European Parliament, the United Nations agencies, and the International Criminal Court. There has also been much work on the implementation of gender equality policies at the municipal level in countries like Sweden (Freidenvall and Ramberg 2021), India (Turnbull 2021), and Spain (La Barbera, Espinosa-Fajardo, and Caravantes 2023).

More recently, there has been considerable interest in women, authoritarianism, and the role of regime type. There are two different strains of research in this area. One literature examines the rise of right-wing parties in democracies and their impact on gender policy and women (Bektas and Issever-Ekinci 2019; Christley 2022). The other focuses on the uses and abuses of women's rights in longstanding authoritarian regimes, and the implications of these instrumental strategies for women's movements (Barnett and Shalaby 2023; Bjarnegård and Donno 2023; Bush and Zetterberg 2024; Comstock and Vilán 2023; Tripp 2023b).

For a long time, much of the focus in the gender and politics literature has been on women and gender in legislatures. An important development in the field is the expansion of studies relating to other institutions like the judiciary, the executive, subnational government, government bureaucracies, and regional and international institutions. The explosion of research on the judiciary has been reflected in the pages of *P&G* (Escobar-Lemmon et al. 2021; Tøraasen 2023; Shortell and Valdinì 2022). Pioneers like Farida Jalalzai worked on women heads of state and of government early on in the 2000s (see also Jalalzai 2024 for her reflections on *P&G* in expanding this research area). As the numbers of women in the executive positions has increased, new research has identified patterns and trendlines which were difficult to discern earlier (Bauer and Darkwah 2022; Baumann, Bäck, and Davidsson 2019; Davidson-Schmich, Jalalzai, and Och 2023; Kroeber and Hüffelmann 2022). For example, Barnes and Taylor-Robinson (2018) have noted that women's new access to powerful cabinet positions like defense, finance, and foreign affairs — even though they are underrepresented — has improved popular satisfaction with and confidence in women's ability to govern. Alexander and Jalalzai (2018) have similarly highlighted the symbolic importance of these high level appointments. Scherpereel, Adams, and Hayes (2021, 775) explain why there is a strong relationship in parliamentary systems “between the gendered distribution of seats in governing parties’ parliamentary delegations and the gendered distribution of seats in the cabinets those parties create.” Many of the questions about these institutions are similar to those initially asked about women in legislatures: factors influencing descriptive representation and public perceptions about women in these positions. But even here the literature explaining the structure and implications of voters’ bias toward women politicians has significantly expanded and become more sophisticated.

I have only scratched the surface of the many themes that have emerged with the explosion of articles published in the comparative politics subfield in *P&G*. These authors of these articles now also represent a broader swath of the field, including more men; more scholars of color, including diaspora scholars and scholars of foreign descent in the United States; and others who do not focus on gender and politics as their primary research area. In the past, more junior scholars might have shied away from the field for fear of being marginalized. Today, such impediments are increasingly falling by the wayside, although, as Jennifer Piscopo shows, inclusion of gender and politics studies in general political science journals still has a long way to go (Piscopo *forthcoming*).

The methodologies have also expanded. When I was editor, many of the comparative politics submissions employed structured and semi-structured interviews, participant observation, ethnographic methods, life histories, critical frame analysis, Qualitative Comparative Analysis, and historical institutionalism. Some drew on content analysis of the media, legislative documents, and other forms of archival research to understand how gender issues were framed in public discourse and policy. While these methodologies are still prevalent and have expanded in variety and sophistication, there has been a marked shift toward more quantitative methods and mixed methods, combining both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Survey experiments are also frequently used to investigate public opinion and behavioral responses. One consequence of the quantitative drift is that more authors collaborate. When I edited the journal, the norm in comparative politics research was single-authored papers. Today, about 60% of the articles are coauthored.

One key factor that has strengthened global research has been the improvement of data in certain areas — for example, Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum), Inter-Parliamentary Union Data on Women, Gender Quotas Database (International IDEA), Quota Adoption and Reform Over Time (QAROT), WhoGov (ministers), GenDip (diplomats), Gen-PaCS (civil service), the Woman Stats Project, Gender Equality Data and Statistics (World Bank), Varieties of Democracy, European Institute for Gender Equality, and United Nations Women's Gender Data. But large gaps still remain. For example, in the area of public opinion, World Values Surveys, the European Values Survey, Afrobarometer, Arab Barometer, Asian Barometer, and AmericasBarometer devote only a small portion of their questions to gender-related topics (Alexander and Bolzendahl 2017 cited in Tripp and Hughes 2018). This leaves political scientists with limited tools with which to study gender globally.

For a long time, cross-national research relied heavily on data from North America, Europe, and other developed regions of the world. As better quality data has been collected and datasets have been created, scholarship has improved. However, this is still an area that has a long way to go in many parts of the world, particularly Africa, the MENA region, and much of Asia, even in the more economically powerful countries. This lack of good data is a problem not just in hard to reach places, but also in conflict-ridden areas and parts of the world that live under extreme repression.

Future Directions

Twenty years since its launch, *P&G* has evolved to reflect the richness of scholarship on gender and politics in the quantity of articles, their depth and scope, varied methods, and diversity of topics. The editors, authors, and reviewers are to be commended for making this one of the most important journals in this area.

One hopes that as the field evolves, *P&G* and other political science journals will continue becoming even more inclusive. Its authors include numerous scholars living in Europe and the US, but few based in developing countries. Less than 2% of the full-length articles published in *P&G* between 2008 and 2017 were by scholars based in the Global South (Medie and Kang 2018). Few American scholars, for example, coauthor with scholars in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Similarly, when it comes to citations, *P&G*, like other journals, would be well served if the work it cited reflected a broader range of sources. Failing to cite the work of scholars belonging to non-dominant groups devalues their contributions and sidelines the critical perspectives and findings they offer on important political questions. It skews the interpretation of evidence, but also limits the scope of research questions.

Another blind spot relates to the concept and measurement of gender. Although gender identities and expressions are widely understood to exist on a spectrum, survey researchers still use binary sex labels to represent gender, thus imposing a binary framework on their research findings (Westbrook and Saperstein, 2015). Studies on self-identification across a gender identity continuum — from most masculine to most feminine — reveal that only one-third of respondents position themselves at the extremes (Bittner and Goodyear-Grant 2017). It would be useful for gender and politics researchers to creatively reconsider more carefully how they conceptualize gender in their work.

The increased adoption of quantitative methodologies in the comparative study of politics has sometimes been accompanied by the narrowing of the research questions or the discovery of self-evident findings. Many of these smaller questions are important building blocks for larger theories, but they are no substitute for also asking bigger strategic questions about the gendered impact of cultural changes; the economy; war; various types of health, political and social crises; international diffusion of norms; regime type; and other such factors. We need to keep considering the relevance of what we study to the big questions of our day.

We are seeing more such research that increasingly points to better understandings of the problem, which allows for stronger frames for solutions. But we still do not know much about women's substantive representation globally; what strategies and frames work best in responding to right-wing attacks on women; what tactics and policies work best in combatting violence against women in politics and elsewhere; which coalitions are the most effective in advancing women's rights; and what are the possibilities and limitations of mobilization around women's rights in authoritarian contexts or in fragile and postconflict states, just to give a few examples. We have relatively large gaps in data on gender and politics when it comes to Africa, the MENA region, Asia, Eurasia,

Central and East Europe, and much of the Pacific. Comparative historical perspectives are often lacking. We still have rudimentary comparative data and theorizing about women in subnational politics. Many continue to struggle with how to incorporate intersectionality into their work. Gender and other intersecting disparities are not to be tinkered with. Instead, we need to use our research for meaningful and urgent resolutions to the problems of our time.

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