

Can There Be a Feminist Rational Choice Institutionalism?¹

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Gender and politics scholars have long recognized the importance of political institutions (Lovenduski 1998). Most of this work focuses on formal institutions (Chappell 2006; Kenney 1996), but several studies discuss gendered practices and norms in ways that can be seen as consistent with definitions of informal institutions (Duerst-Lahti and Kelly 1995; Kenny 2007). Despite these shared concerns, few feminists frame their research in relation to institutionalism. To the degree that they do, they tend to view the most promising point of intersections to be with historical, sociological, and discursive versions. In contrast, they seem more wary of rational choice, arguing that this brand of institutionalism is unhelpful to, if not fundamentally incompatible with, the objectives of feminist research (cf. Kenny and Paantjens 2006).

In this article, we discuss the potential for a feminist rational choice institutionalism. The first section sketches the basic contours of feminism and rational choice theory in order to explore whether this silence means that they are in fact irreconcilable. In the second section, we consider what might be gained by forging a combined approach. A feminist rational choice institutionalism, we argue, would entail research designs attentive to issues of gender, strategy, institutions, power, and change. We illustrate the analytical benefits of this synthesis in the third section, where we consider how it might be used to answer a key question in recent research: What explains the adoption of candidate gender quotas?

The Divide: Feminism and Rational Choice Theory

Both feminism and rational choice theory are characterized by diverse schools of thought. At a minimum, doing better research for feminists

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means incorporating “gender” as an analytic category (Hawkesworth 2006), expanding existing definitions of “politics” (Okin 1979), and generating insights that may be used to pursue political change (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2007). For rational choice scholars, gaining improved knowledge of the world involves connecting micro-level interactions to macro-level processes and events (Ferejohn 2002), paying attention to the ways that individuals make choices within constraints — including projections about the probable actions of others — to explain various equilibrium solutions or deviations (Levi 1997). Despite similar ambitions to rethink existing modes of political analysis, studies applying these two perspectives rarely overlap.

Although few political scientists reflect on this separation, this divide has been noted and discussed by feminists in a range of related disciplines, including economics (Ferber and Nelson 1993), philosophy (Anderson 2001; Cudd 2001; Thalos 2005), and sociology (England 1989). These critiques share the opinion that rational choice theory is often sexist, in the sense that many of its “particular exemplifications deny to women, or to ‘feminine’ persons, the status of independent rational agents” (Anderson 2001, 369), and androcentric, to the degree that it “assumes that the experiences, biology, and social roles of males or men are the norm and that of females or women a deviation from the norm” (Cudd 2001, 403). It is important to note, however, that several of these authors see significant room for engagement and suggest that feminist insights are by no means incompatible with many contemporary rational choice applications (Cudd 2001; Thalos 2005).

Feminism as an intellectual and political project, in turn, has found few advocates among rational choice theorists. This reception has mainly involved silence, rather than any type of outright opposition. However, rational choice scholars have begun to seriously engage with the study of identity and expression. For example, Randall Calvert observes that “rational-choice models do not contradict the existence of identity and expression,” and “properly formulated, can be a valuable addition to social science’s tools for studying those phenomena” (2002, 570). All the same, he concedes that many rational choice theories present an inherently “undersocialized” model of human behavior. For this reason, he argues that these frameworks require “supplementation in order to give a full accounting of identity and expressive phenomena, as well as other features of social life” (Calvert 2002, 593). Feminism’s varied understandings of gender and identity can prove invaluable for future rational choice theorizing of men’s and women’s situated agency.

Several studies done by economists illustrate how these tools might be applied to feminist ends, pointing to the possible benefits of rapprochement between feminism and rational choice theory (Luker 1975; Mackie 1996).

The Synthesis: Feminist Rational Choice Institutionalism

This discussion points to elements of feminism and rational choice theory that could be combined to forge a common approach. Feminist rational choice institutionalism, we argue, would involve a focus on gender, strategy, institutions, power, and change. An obvious contribution from feminism is the concept of *gender*. According to one well-known definition, gender is two things: “A constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes,” and “a primary way of signifying relationships of power” (Scott 1988, 42). From a feminist perspective, rational choice models that ignore gender “get it wrong” when it comes to understanding the nature of the problem at hand, because they cannot capture core features of individuals’ “psychological and affective dispositions that feed into their ‘rational’ calculation” (Gatens 1998, 9).

A second element is *strategy*. In rational choice theory, being strategic simply involves considering what others will do before making choices (Levi 1997). Although questions of strategy are frequently raised in the context of feminist research, feminist scholars rarely theorize strategy *per se*. The opportunity to think more explicitly about how individuals’ choices are shaped by beliefs about the behavior of others may thus push feminist scholars to formalize their intuitions in relation to a host of topics that have often — and rarely — been viewed through a strategic lens.

A third component is *institutions*, which, as noted previously, figure prominently in feminist analyses although they are rarely theorized as such (but see Chappell 2006; Krook 2009; Lovenduski 1998). Rational choice theorists also give a central role to institutions in their attempts to explain various political phenomena. They approach institutions as exogenous and endogenous, exploring the effects of individual institutions and asking why particular institutions emerge and survive (Weingast 2002). The goal is generally to understand how institutions affect sequences of interaction, the choices available to particular actors, the structures of information and beliefs, and the payoffs to individuals and groups. Shared interest in the role of institutions suggests an

important theoretical overlap in the concerns of feminism and rational choice theory.

A fourth element is *power*. As the previous definition of gender suggests, feminists are keenly aware of relations of power and how pervasive they are in shaping the dynamics of political life, including the boundaries drawn around what is considered to be political. In contrast, power is often a peripheral component in most applications of rational choice theory, mainly because it tends to view political institutions as structures of voluntary cooperation that resolve collective action problems and benefit all concerned (Knight 1992). Yet, as Terry Moe (2005) points out, the political processes that generate institutions tend to create structures that are good for some people but bad for others, depending on the group that has the strength and authority to impose its will. Bringing in a focus on power is thus vital to a feminist–rational choice approach, which can in turn inform both literatures by modeling the ways that power operates, whether they entail obvious coercion or more subtle dynamics of exclusion.

A fifth facet is an emphasis on *change*. Because a central goal of feminism is to contribute to positive transformation, feminist research is full of examples of how gender norms can be disrupted through strategic engagements with political institutions (Chappell 2006). In contrast, studies using rational choice theory tend to focus more on stability, viewing moments of change in terms of a transition between equilibrium orders (Weingast 2002). However, these two concerns can come together. Once institutions are created, they are reinforced through power relations that privilege certain groups at the expense of others. Yet the mere act of uncovering this dynamic opens up the possibility of an alternative: “[U]nderstanding institutional evolution and change lies in specifying more precisely the reproduction and feedback mechanisms on which particular institutions rest . . . for it is there that we will find clues as to the particular external processes that can produce political opening and change” (Thelen 1999, 400). A feminist–rational choice framework thus involves the potential for political transformation.

An Application: Explaining Gender Quota Adoption

This approach might be used to analyze a wide range of topics. For purposes of illustration, we focus on the adoption of candidate gender quotas. These policies have appeared in more than a hundred countries

(Krook 2009); most have been approved unanimously or nearly unanimously by male-dominated legislatures and political parties. This pattern is puzzling from both a feminist and a rational choice perspective: Feminists have long theorized women's exclusion from electoral politics with reference to social norms associating men with the public sphere and women with the private (cf. Elshtain 1981), whereas rational choice analysts since Anthony Downs (1957) have tended to hypothesize legislators' behavior in relation to their desire to be reelected. However, with the help of a feminist–rational choice approach, it is possible to begin to theorize what may be occurring. This entails exploring the gendered nature of access to political office, the strategic motivations that may lead male elites to recognize advantages to quota adoption, the role of existing institutions of candidate selection and the degree to which their effects are altered or reinforced through quotas, the unequal balance of power that enables men to determine the conditions of women's access to the political system, and the potential for quota policies to disrupt earlier dynamics of exclusion.

The question at the core of the analysis is why male elites might approve a measure that is fundamentally against their self-interest: for the number of women to increase, the proportion of men must decrease. We might begin by assuming that the state of the world prior to quota adoption is in equilibrium, meaning that no actor has the incentive to unilaterally behave differently, given the game and the constraints he or she faces. Observing that quota laws are passed, we can then reason that the quota was viewed by supporters as a measure that would improve their individual situation, or at the very least, not make them worse-off. Politicians within enacting coalitions thus either have incentives to do so or are basically indifferent. A brief comparison of quota adoption in Brazil and Argentina offers insights into this process, and by extension, why these policies have had divergent effects: Despite similar 30% quota laws, the proportion of women in parliament is currently 9% in Brazil but 40% in Argentina (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2009).

In Brazil, the open-list proportional representation (PR) electoral system, combined with inchoate and decentralized parties, leads individual legislators to face substantial intraparty competition when seeking reelection, causing them to rely on personalistic appeals to win seats. In this context, it is possible that legislators passing the quota law made one of three calculations. First, legislators may have perceived positive effects for themselves, noting that with quotas, they would enjoy incumbency advantages in the face of a substantial rise in inexperienced political

opponents. Second, they may not have been concerned about their own prospects for reelection. As voters are free to choose any candidate on the list, there is no such thing as an “electable” position, and therefore no insurance that women nominated through a quota would win seats at election time. Third, because most parties in Brazil lack a centralized or coherent party leadership, legislators may have anticipated that the quota rule would simply go unenforced. Thus, the adoption of the quota can be understood as little more than a symbolic gesture: Individual legislators bore little or no cost to its adoption, and as could be predicted, its implementation did not appreciably increase the numbers of women in the national parliament.

In Argentina, elections are governed by closed-list PR, and party leaders exercise tight control over placement on all electoral lists. As such, legislators are beholden to leaders who decide future access to political nomination. Aware of these dynamics, quota advocates focused their efforts on winning the support of these key players. On the day of debate, the fate of the quota bill appeared unclear until a last-minute intervention from President Carlos Menem, who instructed deputies from his party, the majority in the chamber, to vote in favor of the quota. In this scenario, passing the bill required male legislators to weigh their desire to reject the policy against their prospects for a future political career. Not surprisingly, all chose the latter, as it was the option that made them less worse off. This shift, in turn, altered the calculations of legislators in other parties, who quickly threw their support behind the bill as well in order to avoid voting against a measure that was likely to pass with or without their vote and, possibly, incur public criticism from the many women’s groups mobilizing on behalf of the quota. Once approved, the policy was routinely violated, but with the help of courts and the president, was eventually enforced such that the proportion of women matched and then exceeded the quota requirement.

Conclusions

The general lack of engagement between feminism and rational choice theory suggests that a feminist rational choice institutionalism cannot — or is unlikely to — exist. In this essay, we seek to show that there is potential for a combined approach. After reviewing key features of feminism and rational choice theory, we propose that a synthesis would involve attending to questions of gender, strategy, institutions, power, and

change. We then illustrate, albeit briefly, the contours and benefits of such an approach with reference to research on gender quotas. The discussion demonstrates how this approach would elicit new questions, generate new models, and offer findings that present new recommendations for altering the status quo. Further research will be necessary to elaborate what a feminist rational choice institutionalism would look like in practice. The current aim is simply to point to promising new directions for study, given current gaps and silences in political research.

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What Can Historical Institutionalism Offer Feminist Institutionalists?

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In this essay I lay out how historical institutionalism (HI) could serve as an important tool for feminist political scientists, highlighting the potentially distinctive contribution and advantages of a feminist historical institutionalism (rather than a feminist institutionalism) for feminist political science and particularly for a feminist comparative politics. The potentially significant contribution of HI is to help us answer some "big questions," in particular, how and why institutional change occurs. This, in turn, can help us understand how positive gender change, such as improvements in women's descriptive and substantive representation, can