Feminist Institution Building: Political Science and *Politics & Gender*

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The twentieth anniversary of *Politics & Gender* is a good time to reflect on feminist institution building in political science and its role in sustaining an epistemic community advancing gender-related knowledge. These reflections stem in part from my experience as co-founder in 1979 of the Women's Caucus of the Australian Political Studies Association and continuing involvement in disciplinary initiatives including the Gender and Diversity Monitoring Reports of the International Political Science Association. Until the 1960s, when I did my undergraduate degree, political science rested on assumptions that the absence of women from public life was natural, a condition rather than a problem. There was a general lack of interest in the structures of power that might explain women's absence.

Influential political scientists such as Robert E Lane, President of the American Political Science Association (APSA) in 1970–71, helped reinforce beliefs that the absence of women from public decision-making was in fact desirable as their presence would be at the expense of their primary social role. Lane questioned the wisdom of the feminist movement in encouraging women's political activity, noting that interest in politics moved women away from what was "considered by the culture" to be their proper role and sphere of competence. Moreover, such "extra-curricular interests" meant borrowing time and attention from their children (Lane 1959, 355).

Such beliefs were clearly shared by the political scientists supposedly writing about them from a completely objective point of view. The trope of the neglected child, victim of the political woman, dates back at least to the Victorian era and the portrait of Mrs Jellyby in Dickens' *Bleak House*. In their classic study, *The Civic Culture*, Almond and Verba attributed a more benign role to the political woman but saw this role as shaping the political socialization of children rather than

"the suffragette's dream of women in cabinets, at the upper levels of the civil service, and the like" (Almond and Verba, 1965: 334).

The renewed mobilization of women in the 1960s and 70s brought some trenchant criticism of the complicity of political science in the male dominance of politics:

> That politics is a man's world is a familiar adage; that political science as a discipline tends to keep it that way is less well accepted (Bourque and Grossholtz 1974, 225).

A year later Murray Goot and Elizabeth Reid were dissecting the way political science reached biased conclusions about female voters in their *Women and Voting Studies: Mindless Matrons or Sexist Scientism?* (Goot and Reid 1975). Reflecting the times, their analysis appeared in a contemporary political sociology series edited by Richard Rose, with an international editorial advisory board of 19 members, all of them men.

The feminist political scientists speaking out in the 1970s were motivated by the belief that the absence of women from political office was not a natural condition but an injustice. They brought with them from the women's movement a commitment to contesting received wisdom and speaking out about women's experience – leading to consciousness-raising stories when the Women's Caucus for Political Science was founded at the 1969 APSA conference in New York (Tolleson-Rinehart and Carroll 2006, 510). In addition to inclusion of women's experience came a commitment to a less hierarchical and more inclusive political world. Such normative commitment became a distinguishing mark of the new feminist political science, at odds with the reigning positivist emphasis on "value-free" approaches.

In response to criticisms of "lack of objectivity," feminist researchers called for reflexivity concerning both the values brought to research and the influence of positionality or standpoint. The new feminist epistemology challenged the silences over gendered power relations and the boundaries drawn around what constituted the political system. As Mary Hawkesworth has written, "Gender as an analytic category illuminates gender power and gendered institutions and delineates a research agenda that quite literally did not exist 30 years ago" (Hawkesworth 2005, 147).

Not all gender research was feminist in nature, some behavioral research was more concerned with sex as a background variable than with gender as an analytic category. Feminist research remained distinguished by its concern with power, its problem-oriented character, and its normative commitments. Its social movement origins and commitment to reflecting the concerns of women's movements worldwide were proudly proclaimed by the founding editors of *Politics & Gender* in its first issue. Over time, gender and politics research has contributed to women's movement advocacy on issues such as electoral systems, gender electoral quotas, violence against women in politics, women's policy machinery, and gender responsive budgeting.

The authority of dominant forms of knowledge production had come under challenge as feminists began institution-building within political science in the

Table 1. Institution building in selected political science associations

Political science association	Gender research section	Change of name
UK Political Studies Association	1977 Women and Politics Specialist Group	
International Political Science Association (IPSA)	1979 Research Committee on Sex Roles and Politics	2003 Research Committee on Gender, Politics and Policy
European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR)	1985 Standing Group on Women and Politics	2007 Gender and Politics Standing Group
American Political Science Association (APSA)	1986 Women and Politics Research Section	2020 Women, Gender, and Politics Section
International Studies Association (ISA)	1990 Feminist Theory and Gender Studies Section	
German Political Science Association (DVPW)	1992 Research Committee on Women and Politics	2010 Research Committee on Gender and Politics
Canadian Political Science Association	2000 Women and Politics Section	2006 Women, Gender, and Politics Section

1970s – both to promote the status of women in the profession and to support gender-related research. While women's caucuses and status committees are important and helped ensure the presence of women in PSA leadership positions,[1] I focus here on the research groups that began to be established in national and international political science associations (PSAs) in the late 1970s. Often names were changed over subsequent decades (see Table 1) to indicate that the reach of this new subfield of political science extended beyond the political role of women to the role of gender, including heteronormativity, hegemonic forms of masculinity, and intersectionality in shaping how power is exercised across public and private spheres.

This institution building ensured disciplinary space for the presentation of gender research, whether in dedicated streams in mainstream conferences or in gender and politics conferences and journals. Space in the disciplinary rewards system was also ensured through the creation of new awards, prizes, and scholarships, and sometimes even through the introduction of gender-related conditions for research funding, as in the European Union's Horizon Europe program. In some cases, gender research sections came to directly sponsor a journal, while in other cases journals remained independent of PSAs although with many links. The significance of such journals is illustrated by the US journal *Women & Politics* (now the *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*). Although not an official journal of the APSA Women and Politics Section, it played a major role in ensuring the publication of gender and politics research in the 1980s (Kelly et al. 1994).

These developments did much to consolidate an epistemic community of gender scholars, networked at the international level, and gender and politics

research sections became among the largest and liveliest sections of PSAs. It can be argued, however, that they did less to mainstream gender perspectives in the discipline (Ritter and Mellow 2000; Costa and Sawer, 2019). Gender and politics research became one of the large and relatively autonomous subfields in political science, each with their own networks and rewards systems – the "separate tables" tradition of the discipline. It became a discrete chapter in politics textbooks or handbooks, rather than informing the rest of the chapters – in other words, it was additive rather than transformative.

While specialized knowledge claims were advanced using new approaches and concepts, and commitment to social and political change remained, disciplinary norms persisted. The social sciences differ in terms of how "open" they are to other disciplines, measured by whether most citations come from within the discipline or from more diverse sources. Political science has relatively closed citation norms, particularly when compared with sociology and anthropology. This is significant because studies of the social sciences find that feminism has had most impact in the disciplines that are open to interdisciplinary research (Ackerly and True, 2008; Pearse et al. 2019).

Recent overviews in both Europe and the US have continued to emphasize the need to promote interdisciplinarity and greater reflection on praxis in order for political science to become a more inclusive discipline (Ahrens et al. 2021). Lack of reflexivity in political science has been found to contribute to slowness in extending coverage not only of gender issues but also of race, ethnicity, and diversity issues and the processes that lead to marginalization of groups within the political system (Pinderhughes and Kwakwa 2017).

Despite the commitment of PSA gender research sections to interdisciplinarity, this has proved elusive. To illustrate, the new journal proposal for *Politics & Gender* from the APSA Women and Politics Section suggested that "The journal will be distinctive by including original, innovative, and stimulating scholarship that remains too unconventional or interdisciplinary for generalist journals in the profession" (Norris 2003, 3). This aim of including interdisciplinary contributions was repeated by successive editors.

However, by 2015 citations in *Politics & Gender* approximated the relatively closed disciplinary norm found in the top ten political science journals (Pearse et al. 2019, 116–117). This means there was relatively little citation of other disciplines and also that quantitative research methods were used in 58% of articles (Stauffer and O'Brien 2019, 156). In general, quantitative methods have been increasingly used in gender and politics research, unlike earlier days when "Influenced by comparative work in sociology and anthropology, the qualitative case study was queen" (Tripp and Hughes 2018: 245).

Conversely, the rise in popularity of feminist institutionalism (FI) for the study of women's experience within political institutions may signal a revival of interdisciplinary approaches. In analyzing the informal norms and practices within institutions such as parliaments or political parties, FI research overlaps with anthropology in the observation of performances and rituals (Crewe 2014). It also derives concepts such as the gendered logic of appropriateness (Chappell 2006) from the emphasis in sociological institutionalism on norms and how new

entrants into an institution are socialized into the logic of appropriateness that governs behavior within it.

Something to note about FI is not only how it situates itself in one of the major strands of contemporary political science – new institutionalism – but also how it labels itself as "feminist." This is a term often avoided when feminist institution building takes place within states or within transnational organizations such as the United Nations. Similarly, feminist research in political science has not always dared to speak its name, perhaps illustrated by the avoidance of the term in major feminist journals such as *Politics & Gender* or the *European Journal of Politics and Gender.* This contrasts with major journals in economics or international relations such as *Feminist Economics* and *The International Feminist Journal of Politics.* The choice of the word "feminist" rather than "women" or "gender" was regarded as important in the latter, along with building "a feminist community around and beyond the journal itself" (Rosa 2018, 481).

To return to anthropology, a search of *Politics & Gender* in May 2024 found some 19 articles (out of 344) using ethnographic methods, 17 reviews of books using such methods, and other articles referring briefly to evidence from ethnographic research or its potential. Most of the articles drawing on anthropological approaches were, however, on non-US subjects, reflecting continuing national differences in political science traditions. For example, mainstream journals in the United Kingdom like *Parliamentary Affairs* have been relatively open to research using feminist institutional approaches and qualitative methods.

Apart from failure to live up to interdisciplinary ambitions, it is sometimes suggested there has been a failure in the gender and politics research community to move beyond the boundaries traditionally drawn by political science around what constitutes the political system (Dean 2015). Much of the research published in *Politics & Gender*, for example, relates to the formal political institutions that have been the traditional subject of political science, rather than the practices that maintain gender hierarchy in everyday life (Weldon 2019, 65). This is less true of the "Critical Perspectives" section of the journal but even FI research, which highlights informal norms and practices that reproduce gender power relations, does so in relation to institutions like political parties and parliaments.

It has been argued that feminist organizing within the discipline may itself be partly responsible for the persistence of disciplinary norms in gender research. In making a place for gender scholars within the discipline, an alternative home has been created to interdisciplinary gender studies centres and interdisciplinary journals (Abels 2016). Nonetheless, feminist organizing has changed the face of political science and gender research has contributed to electoral and parliamentary reform, as well as to the application of a gender lens in the policy process. The ambitions of feminist political scientists of the 1970s have not all been realised but an epistemic community has been established with an ongoing commitment to a more gender-equal politics. Journals such as *Politics & Gender* play an important role in this and in advancing

knowledge of both the resilience of gendered political institutions and the possibilities of change.

Note

1. For example, the Australian PSA adopted a convention of alternating men and women in the position of president from 1998, the American PSA from 2001, and other countries have followed, including Spain, Portugal, Brazil, and Tunisia (Abu-Laban et al. 2018, 14). IPSA contributes to dissemination of such "good practices" across PSAs.

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