A Feminist Institutionalist Approach

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The "institutional turn" in political science reflects a wider consensus among both feminist and mainstream scholars that institutions — broadly defined as the formal and informal "rules of the game" — deeply shape political life. Political institutions are also profoundly gendered. Yet, despite significant advancements in institutional analysis over the past few decades, gender politics scholars continue to grapple with how to "capture" the gendered character and gendering effects of institutions. This contribution explores how insights from feminist institutionalism (see, for example, Kenny 2007; 2013; Krook and Mackay 2011) can help us address these methodological challenges. It argues that a feminist institutionalist approach provides useful insights into the gendered foundations of political institutions, the operation and importance of informal institutions, and the general and gendered mechanisms of continuity and change.

NAILING THE (GENDER) BIAS

How do we research gender in institutions? This is a difficult question, as gender is not always easy to "see" in institutions. It is part of the "logic of appropriateness" of political institutions, enacted through subtle and sometimes unconscious practices (Chappell 2006; March and Olsen 1989). Thus, in researching the gendered foundations or "dispositions" of institutions, it is crucially important to nail the bias.[1] It is not enough to simply assert that gender bias exists in institutions; rather, researchers must move beyond the description stage and systematically identify particular gendered institutional processes and mechanisms and their gendered effects (see Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010). This is crucial not only to advance theory building on gender and institutions, but also, strategically, to continue to make the case to mainstream scholars of the importance and central role of gender in institutional analysis.

Scholars must start, then, by mapping the formal architecture and informal rules, norms, and practices of the particular institutions under

1. A point made by Joni Lovenduski (2009).

study while also remaining attentive to the active and ongoing ways in which gender is reinscribed in these institutions (cf. Lovenduski 2011). It is here that discursive approaches to institutional analysis could be usefully engaged (see, for example, Freidenvall and Krook 2011; Kulawik 2009). In my own research on political recruitment in Scotland, for example, historical and discursive approaches are used to help identify and explore the gendered dynamics of the candidate selection process (see Kenny 2013). Drawing on the theoretical concept of *chains of equivalence* (Hansen 2006; cf. Laclau and Mouffe 1985), I explore the ways in which meaning is not simply assigned through gendered dichotomies in the selection process, but is instead established through a more complex process of *linking* and *differentiation*. For example, in the Scottish Labour Party, internal party debates over gender quotas were discursively reframed in terms of the (seemingly neutral) criterion of "localness." As such, party selectors frequently argued that the "problem" with centrally enforced quota measures was not with women candidates per se; rather, the problem was the central imposition of "outsiders." While the tension between "locals" and "outsiders" was framed in gender-neutral terms, this construction was profoundly gendered. The repeated linking of gender quotas with "imposed central intervention" positioned female candidates as perpetual outsiders to the process, marking women as "other."

Research on men and masculinities also provides useful insights into the mechanisms through which male political dominance is reinforced and maintained in political institutions. Elin Bjarnegård's (2013) recent study of candidate selection in Thailand offers a useful example of such an approach, highlighting the gendered dynamics of the clientelist networks used by Thai politicians. She finds that male politicians cooperate largely with other men, as male political actors are more likely to have access to the political resources and informal networks needed to ensure electoral success in Thailand. Women, in contrast, do not have access to the crucial (and gendered) "homosocial capital" needed to build political networks and gain electoral power.

UNCOVERING THE INFORMAL

In order to systematically investigate the gendered nature of political institutions, we must also look at their formal and informal dimensions and their interplay (Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010). However, as

Chappell and Waylen (2013) note, informal institutions are "notoriously difficult" to research. Large-scale cross-national studies have the potential to identify interesting patterns and give a sense of the wider global context (Bjarnegård 2013); however, uncovering the informal requires in-depth and detailed qualitative work.

Recent work on gender and informal institutions has attempted to overcome these methodological challenges by drawing on methods from other areas of the social sciences, including institutional ethnography (Chappell and Waylen 2013). In theory, methods such as ethnography and participant observation offer promising approaches for getting at the interplay between gender and formal and informal rules. In practice, however, these approaches are not always feasible, particularly given that many researchers have limited time and resources. There are also particular issues that arise in dealing with elite political organizations — political parties, for example, may be reluctant to grant access to particular research settings or information, and access to these organizations may also change over time (for example, if a party is in opposition or in government).[2]

As such, studies of gender and political parties often rely on in-depth interviews to understand the "way things are done" (Bjarnegård 2013; Kenny 2013). Rather than make a strict separation between informal and formal rules or prejudge their relative significance, these studies instead see the mix of elements as an empirical question. This requires that researchers talk to actors themselves about "how things are done around here" and "why do you do X but not Y?" (Lowndes 2005, 306). Such an approach is important not just to understand the role of informal rules, but also to investigate whether or not the formal rules found in official statements really do structure behavior on the ground.

A focus on the day-to-day enactment of political institutions also highlights the continued need for in-depth single case studies in order to capture the complex ways in which gender plays out in different institutional sites. This is not to dismiss or underplay the value of comparative work in this area, which is crucial for theory building (see Chappell 2006). Certainly, there are limits to which findings from single case studies can be related to other settings. Yet while feminist institutionalists are skeptical about the prospects for generating a sort of "general theory of politics," they remain interested in identifying

2. An issue confronted by Childs and Webb (2012), for example, in their recent study of the British Conservative Party.

common causal mechanisms (of power, of continuity, of change), which we can then explore in other contexts (Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010). These causal processes are often most visible at the level of single case studies, where we can see the ways in which the gendered rules of the game (both formal and informal) play out on the ground (Kenny 2013). As such, within-case analysis can help to develop at least limited generalizations that may "travel" well across different settings (cf. Pierson 2004).

TRACING CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

In seeking to explain gendered institutional outcomes in different contexts, researchers must also remain sensitive to spatial and temporal specificities. While all institutions are gendered, gender relations play out differently within and across particular institutions over time. Thus, gender politics scholars must take history seriously. By "placing politics in time" (Pierson 2004) — that is, investigating how processes unfold over an extended temporal period through methods such as historical process tracing — we can reconstruct the reasons for the emergence of a particular outcome through the dynamic of events over time. A temporal analysis draws attention to the potentially transformative effects of gradual and incremental processes of change, while also highlighting underlying continuities through historical "breakpoints." A useful example of this sort of approach is Georgina Waylen's (2007) comparative work on democratic transitions, which highlights the ways in which gendered outcomes emerge through a combination of path-dependent processes set in motion at the point of transition, as well as ongoing contestation and more gradual institutional change. The focus, then, is both on timing and also, crucially, on sequence — seemingly "small" or insignificant events in early stages may have significant effects later on down the road while "large" events at later stages may be less consequential. A historical approach also draws attention to the changing relationship between gender and institutions over time — for example, in terms of feminist engagement and institutional outcomes.

Taking a longer time frame is particularly important in the case of "new" or "young" institutions. Situating particular moments of institutional design and restructuring within wider long-term processes can help us better understand how contemporary outcomes are shaped by and "nested" within legacies of the past, opening up some opportunities for

change but perhaps also closing off others (Mackay 2009; see also Chappell 2011; Kenny 2013). In doing so, it also challenges our expectations about the outcomes of gender equality reform efforts. On the one hand, it reminds us that in studying "new" institutions, we are inevitably talking about institutional "redesign" rather than design (Goodin 1996). "Old" gender norms and legacies are carried forward in both the design and operation of "new" political institutions, limiting possibilities for reform and innovation. At the same time, however, a temporal perspective reminds us that we need to be careful not to overstate the "stickiness" of institutions. New institutions are in the early stages of their development, thus making it difficult to advance strong claims about deterministic paths setting in during the postdesign phase. Indeed, if institutions are gendered, there is also the possibility that they can be "re-gendered" through ongoing processes of political contestation, opening up possibilities for further reform at a later point in time (Beckwith 2005, 133).

CONCLUSION

The methodological challenges of researching gendered institutions require that gender politics scholars allow for, and indeed, seek elements of complexity in their empirical studies (cf. Lowndes 2005) — whether in the form of careful case-by-case analysis or through comparative research across space and time. The task for researchers, then, is to carry out "a fine grained analysis that seeks to identify *what aspects* of a specific institutional configuration are (or are not) renegotiable and *under what conditions*" (Thelen 2003, 233; original emphasis). These kinds of studies are likely to generate new insights into the gendered nature of political institutions that will, in turn, contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of continuity and change.

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